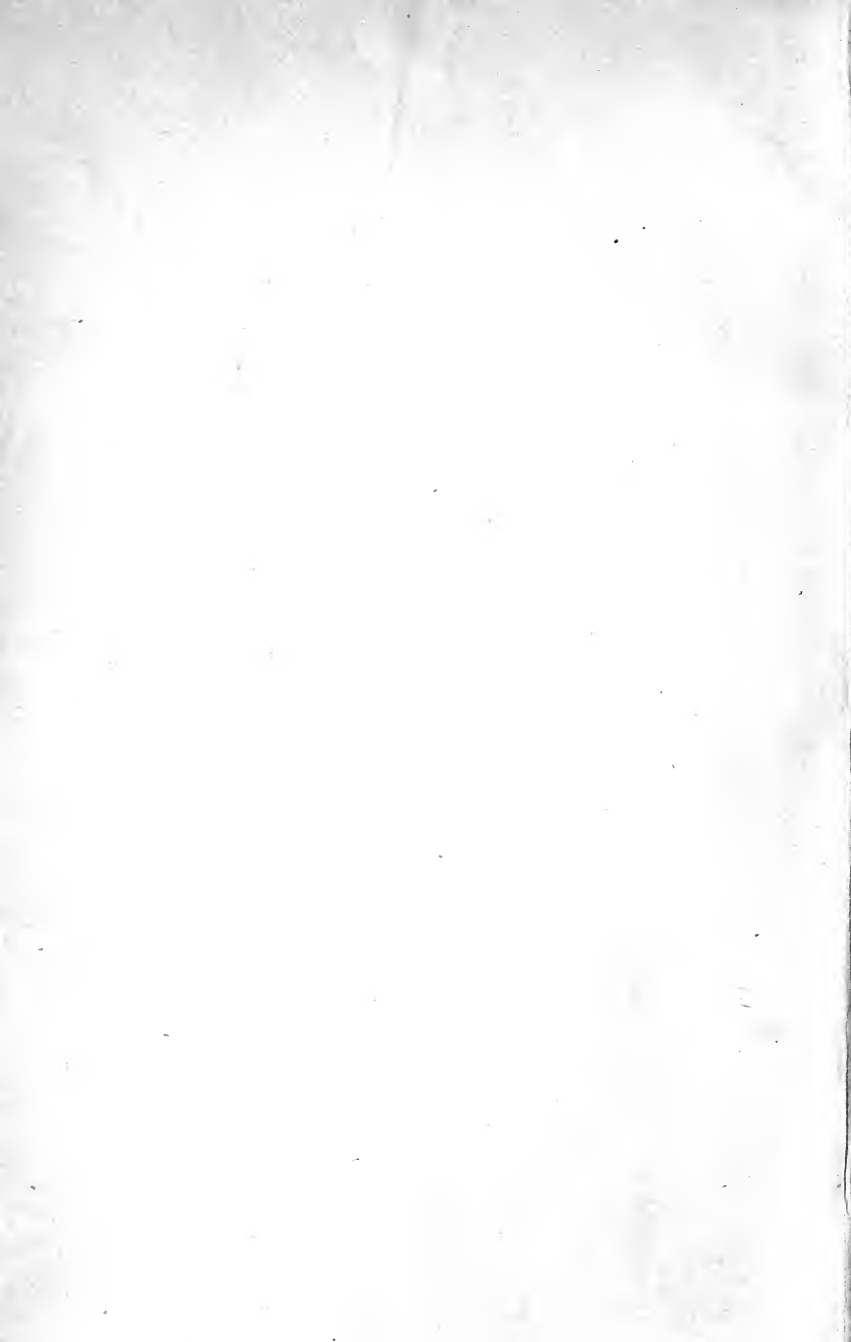




BASIL LYNDHURST



BASIL L.

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,'
'ONLY THE GOVERNESS,' ETC.



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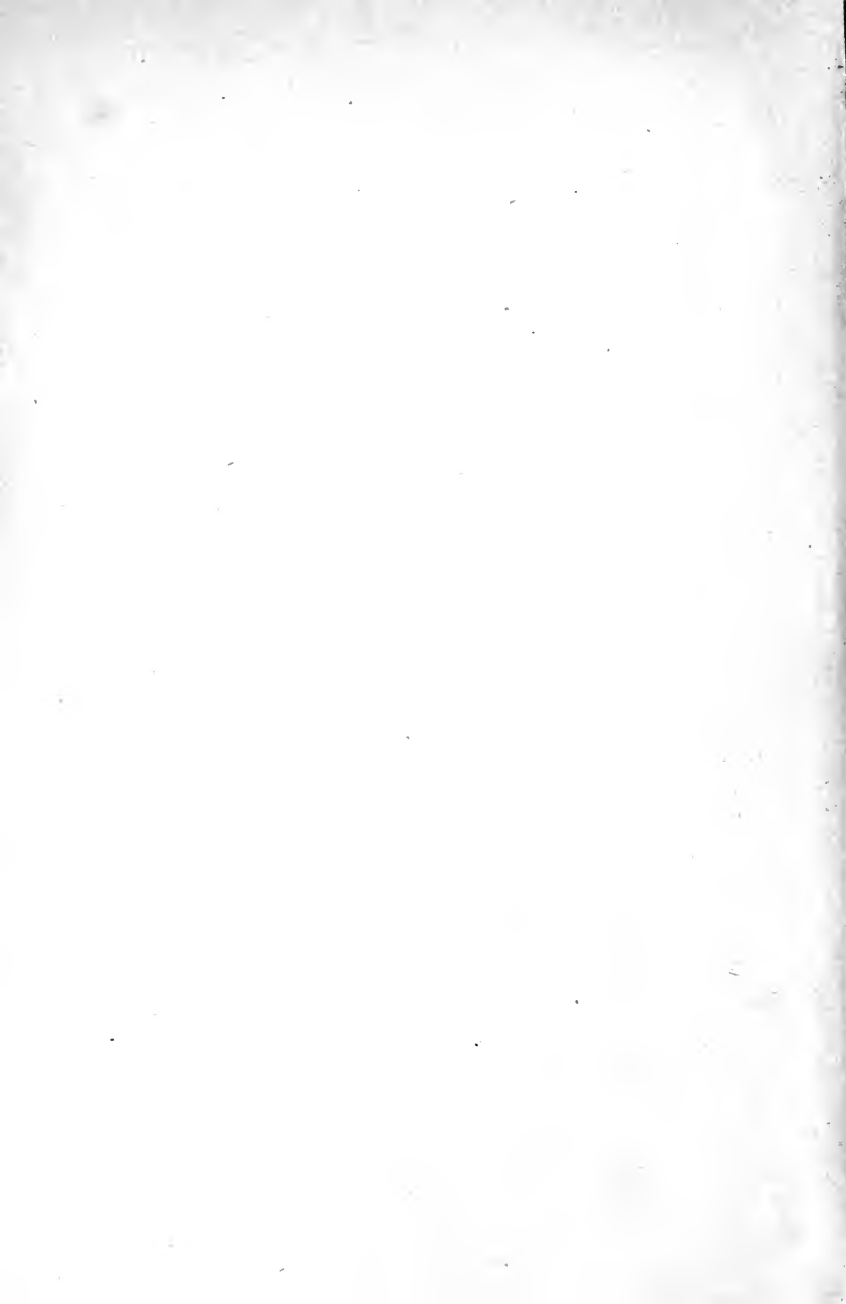
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OLGA'S STORY



CHAPTER I

THE PROEM

'A man only understands that of which he has already the beginnings in himself.'—AMIEL'S JOURNAL.

I SUPPOSE if one were to look back over one's past life, that special days and hours would glide out of the darkness and stand out with almost mirage-like brightness against the dusky background, where all manner of confused childish fancies are hopelessly mingled together; that in our sober-eyed maturity we should be at times startled by the ghost of our child-life looking at us across the years with a tender pathos and pity that would appeal strongly to our inner consciousness.

There is something touching, even to a commonplace mind, in the memory of one's childhood. Once upon a time we lived upon enchanted ground; we skimmed across our own little plot of earth with irresponsible, bird-like motion; we were as giddy as insects in the sunshine; our world was peopled with fairies; all sorts of delightful miracles took place before our eyes. True, the grown-up people were a little tiresome—they invented strange laws: to go to bed when one was not sleepy, for example—but perhaps it was their nature to be tiresome.

How well I remember a little scene painted on my memory in indelible colours! I can see it all so vividly—the brown wainscotted parlour, bright with firelight; outside, the snow falling, a noiseless white shower. The rest of the family had gone to church, grumbling and protesting against the weather, and we two children had been left to amuse each other, Jem proud of being left in charge of his little sister.

We were sitting huddled up together on the low window-seat, with Fox's *Book of Martyrs* between us, and Jem was gloating

over the horribly realistic pictures with the relish of boyish curiosity.

'Jem,' I exclaimed suddenly, 'when I grow up I mean to be a martyr!'

'Don't be a goose, Olga! Look at this fellow on the rack; he must be a plucky one, I should say.'

'Don't show me any more pictures, please,' I pleaded; 'they make me feel bad. I am thinking of that poor lady at the stake, and how brave she was. Mother says it is a grand thing to die for one's religion; I heard her say so to Hubert. When I am quite grown up and as tall as mother I mean to be a martyr.'

'Oh, you silly!' and here Jem looked at me with lofty contempt. 'As though people were burnt now!'

'No, not here—not in England; but among the savages, Jem.'

'Oh, oh! it is a female missionary you would be! What a baby you are, Olga! Why, you cannot bear the least little bit of pain! You cried when your finger was pinched in the door the other day. Hallo! what are you about?' in an astonished voice. 'Oh, you ninny!'

But here Jem broke off to watch my proceedings with breathless interest. Stung by his boyish derision, and elevated by my vague longing for martyrdom, I walked up to the grate and thrust a small finger into the ruddy flame.

Shall I ever forget the fierce smart, the hot, throbbing anguish of the next moment?

'Oh, Jem, it hurts! oh, I can't bear it!' and, throwing myself on the rug, I burst into heartbroken sobs.

It was long before Jem could comfort me; the smart of my scorched finger had entered my childish soul. I had no longer any hope of belonging to the company of celestial maidens who had won their crowns. The desire was there, but the pain was too terrible; and there was Jem wiping away my tears, and every now and then breaking into a shout of boyish laughter.

'What a queer little thing you are, Olga! I don't believe another child would have done it.'

'Don't tell Hubert,' I whispered, for Jem was cuddling me so nicely that I was in a fair way to be comforted.

I did not mind Jem laughing one bit while his eyes looked so kind; but if Hubert should hear it! Why did we always say that? and yet there were but three of us—Hubert and Jem and I!

I wonder if the grown-up Olga is so much wiser than the child Olga, who scorched her chubby finger in the desire to prove herself strong enough for martyrdom. Sometimes even now I have had wild dreams of self-sacrifice, and then have shrunk back at the mere

thought of testing them. 'Oh, Jem, it hurts; I cannot bear it!' I seem to hear the old childish note of pain ringing in my ears now. 'Olga, you are a dreamer of dreams,' Hubert has said to me more than once, and has quoted Kingsley's beautiful words, 'Do noble things, not dream them all day long.' Indeed, he recited the whole poem one day to Kitty and me. Kitty sighed and said it was very true, but I held my peace; I loved that little poem so. Jem and I knew it by heart; and Hubert had spoiled it by repeating it in that measured voice. I never liked Hubert to read poetry to me.

Jem often told me that I was unjust to Hubert; that I did not make allowances for a slow, quiet nature. I daresay he was right; but though I was fond of Hubert as an elder brother, and tried to do my duty to him, and to bear with Kitty for his sake, I could not love him as I did Jem.

Hubert was a great deal older than either of us; he was a full-grown man when Jem was a raw schoolboy. Several brothers and sisters had come between us and had died in infancy. On his deathbed my father had made Hubert our guardian; and when my mother died, and Hubert married Kitty, he brought us to his house. I remembered how Jem and I begged to be allowed to live together, and how Hubert pooh-poohed the notion in that grand way of his.

'Who ever heard of a couple of children keeping house together! Please don't cry about it, Olga. Kitty and I hope to make you very comfortable; and there is the baby to amuse you when Jem goes to Oxford.'

I am sure now that Hubert meant to be kind, and that in his heart he was very sorry for us. Neither then nor afterwards did he complain of his added responsibilities; he made every possible arrangement for our comfort, and I am bound to say that Kitty seconded him. They both welcomed us in the kindest manner, and took pains to show us that we were not in the way; indeed, Kitty tried very hard to be a sister to me.

Six years had passed since Jem and I said good-bye to our dear old home and went to live at Fircroft. Things had changed much since then. Kitty had ceased to be the Kitty of old; the dark-eyed, high-spirited girl who had welcomed us with girlish good-nature had developed into a pale, fretful Kitty, who had lost all her kittenish roundness, and the bright winning ways that had first won Hubert's heart. Perhaps the cares of motherhood oppressed her, or the children came too fast for her strength, or the monotonous routine of domestic life hardly suited her pleasure-loving nature; but as the years went on Kitty grew

careworn and peevish. Her very love for her husband and children developed into fretful anxiety for their well-being. She toiled early and late in their service, with no thought for her own comfort, taking all her husband's kindly attentions with a martyr-like meekness which at once puzzled and distressed him.

Ever since his marriage Hubert had added private tuition to his curate's work. He had three or four pupils living with him— young men who were backward, or in delicate health, or who wanted the services of a private tutor. Jem stepped into one of these vacancies, and worked under Hubert until he went up to Oxford. We were not utterly dependent on Hubert, which made things easier for us; but, with a generosity for which we would not have given him credit, Hubert only repaid himself for our bare maintenance, and so made it possible for Jem to realise his ambition of going to Oxford. The Rector of Brookfield was in bad health, and compelled to live abroad for a year or two, so Hubert was practically curate-in-charge, and his parochial duties, combined with his pupils, kept him fully employed.

I was very happy at Fircroft when Jem was with me, for he was always ready to listen to my grievances, and sympathise with my disappointments; but his first term at Oxford was a severe ordeal for me. The pupils did not interest me. Kitty was too much engrossed with her domestic duties, and too over-weighted altogether to be a companion to a girl of nineteen; and if it had not been for the ladies at the Hall—and especially Aunt Catherine, as Jem and I called her—I should have had rather a dull life; and yet I tried to do my duty to Kitty and the children, and kept all my discontent to myself.

Why is it, I wonder, that we are so dependent on our environment? that we are so clogged by circumstance? that we are unable to rise above the low level of everyday life? Why did Hubert's commonplaces and dry matter-of-fact reduce me to indignant silence, while Jem's mockery and masculine disdain of sentiment only stimulated and amused me? Why did Kitty's plaintive goodness try me more than downright selfishness would have done? Why was I so critical of my belongings, so observant of their shortcomings? Why, indeed!

One day I read a passage in a book of Aunt Catherine's that struck me greatly. It was written by a man who had let all his opportunities slip, and whose life was a failure. And yet this Amiel was a kindly, gifted creature, with noble impulses and a warm heart, and a lofty intellect; but intense timidity and distrust, and an unwholesome habit of introspection and subtle self-criticism spoiled his life-work. 'The man who insists upon seeing

with perfect clearness before he decides, never decides,' as he himself truly says; 'accept life, and you accept regret.'

But the passage that touched me most was this: 'Recognise your place; let the living live; and you, gather together your thoughts; leave behind you a legacy of feelings and ideas. You will be most useful so. Renounce yourself; accept the cup given you, with its honey and its gall, as it comes.'

'Gather together your thoughts; leave behind you a legacy of feelings and ideas. You will be most useful so.' I cannot tell why the words haunted me. Could a girl's thoughts and feelings benefit any human being? Is there anything in my small experience that could interest or encourage a fellow-creature? That is what I want to know; that is why I am ransacking the past in the hope of finding a stray pearl or two of wisdom. The child Olga scorched her finger in the presumptuous search for martyrdom. Perhaps, after all, the girl Olga was no wiser.

I was sitting in the garden one afternoon overlooking the children at their play. Kitty was mending, as usual, in the great empty dining-room; her head ached, and her voice had been more plaintive than usual, as she reluctantly yielded to my request for work.

'There is no need for you to slave too, Olga,' she said, with a certain thinness and acerbity of tone that she always used when she was cross, poor little soul! 'Of course it is my duty; but, as Jem said yesterday, you were not to be made a drudge.'

So that speech had rankled. It was only one of Jem's foolish blunders. Jem had been put out because I stayed to help Kitty in the nursery, instead of going down to the Hall garden with him to hear the nightingales. It was just a fit of boyish impatience that meant nothing. But Kitty had fretted over it in tearful fashion all the evening, and here it was turning up again, as such ill-favoured weeds of speech have a knack of doing.

'Please let me have Wilfred's tunic to finish,' I returned quickly, 'for I never care to be idle;' and I stretched out my hand for the work—for it was no use arguing with Kitty when she was in this mood—and carried it off in triumph. But before I was half-way down the lawn my conscience began to prick me: why could I not have said something kind to cheer her for the rest of the afternoon? Kitty always looked happier if Jem or I said a kind word to her. And here again a speech of my favourite Amiel seemed to prick me with fine needle-like sharpness, for it was so true: 'Oh! let us not wait to be just, or pitiful, or demonstrative towards those we love until they or we are struck down by illness or threatened with

death! Life is short, and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are travelling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love; make haste to be kind!’ With a sudden impulse I went back through the dining-room window just as Hubert entered it by the door.

‘My dear, are you very busy?’ with a rueful glance at his wife’s overflowing work-basket.

‘I am always busy, Hubert,’ returned Kitty rather severely; ‘but of course if you want me——’

‘It is only those letters; they must be answered before post-time, and I have to go down to the schools; but you seem rather overwhelmed, so perhaps Olga might help me,’ looking at me rather beseechingly.

‘No, no,’ replied Kitty hastily; ‘give them to me, Hubert. It was only last night that Jem complained that we had turned Olga into a perfect drudge, and that she never had time for anything. I would rather slave night and day than hear Jem say that again.’

‘My dear, what can you mean?’ and Hubert looked at us both in solemn disapproval. Kitty’s sharp little speeches always took him by surprise; he had a habit of laboriously picking them to pieces to find out their meaning, which was just going on the wrong tack with Kitty, for when people say more than they mean, it is never well to take them literally; but Hubert was literal and exact by nature.

‘Kitty is talking nonsense,’ I interposed. ‘Jem meant nothing by his speech; he does not really think I am put upon, for he knows I like to be useful. If you want me to write your letters, Hubert, you must say so quickly, as the children are waiting for me in the garden.’

‘I always write Hubert’s letters,’ replied Kitty with dignity, for she was not above jealousy, and on certain occasions would stand on her wifely rights. ‘Put them down beside me, Hubert, and they shall be ready by post-time. And you may say what you like, Olga, for you always take Jem’s part, but he really meant what he said—that we take advantage of you. It is not the first time Jem has made these speeches.’

‘Well, well, have your own way, Kitty,’ I said wearily, for I found the discussion fatiguing. I left Hubert to hear the remainder, and to groan in spirit over Jem’s selfishness. Somehow my afternoon’s enjoyment was spoiled—human misunderstanding had thrown a shadow over the sunshine. But I was rather taken aback when I heard Hubert’s footsteps following me.

‘You are too quick, Olga,’ he said reproachfully. ‘I wanted

to ask you a question. Is it Kitty's fancy, or does Jem really think we put upon you ?'

'You had better ask him,' I returned scornfully. And then I relented at the sight of his evident perplexity. 'Oh no, Hubert ; Jem never meant it at all. He was only cross for the moment because I could not attend to him. Why will Kitty make a fuss over every little word ?'

'She is very sensitive. Jem knows that, and ought to be more careful.'

'You cannot expect a young man always to measure his words, Hubert. Jem is far too kind-hearted to give pain consciously. Kitty is too exacting.'

'You must not find fault with her to her husband, Olga ;' and I knew by Hubert's voice that he was much displeased. 'Kitty has far too much to do, and she is not as strong as she ought to be. I think you and Jem might make allowances for slight irritability, if not for Kitty's, at least for my sake.'

I liked Hubert all the better for standing up for his wife. If I had a husband I would not allow any one to find fault with him, I am quite sure of that. But, all the same, I was bound to defend Jem, and it seemed to me as though Hubert was attacking me personally.

'I am always ready to help Kitty,' I returned in an injured tone ; 'neither you nor she has any cause to complain of my conduct. It is not quite fair to speak to me in that way.'

Hubert looked a little taken aback by this ; he was a quiet, even-tempered man, and was for peace at any price.

'Well, well, don't put yourself out, Olga. Of course, Kitty and I know we have no right to turn you into a household drudge, and, of course, we are very grateful for your assistance. You have always acted kindly by us, but as Kitty felt herself aggrieved by Jem's unlucky speech, I thought I must put matters right. I am not the least offended with you.'

'I would much rather you were offended with me than with Jem.'

'How you do spoil that boy !' And here Hubert looked at me reproachfully. 'Nothing Jem says or does is wrong.'

'Nonsense, Hubert !' But all the same he was right. I never could blame the dear fellow. I was a little touched when Hubert looked at me in that melancholy fashion, and stroked his coat-sleeve penitently. I believe he had a fatherly fondness for us both. Could it be possible that he was just a trifle jealous of Jem ?—that he thought his only sister should be more to him—was that the reason of his sad look ? 'Don't talk any more,

Hubert,' I said, dismissing him with a smile; 'I want to finish Wilfred's tunic. Go back to Kitty, and cheer her up a little.'

'No; I must go to the schools.'

But he took my hint, and walked off. I watched him across the lawn. Many people admired Hubert; Kitty did with all her heart. He was a fair, gentlemanly-looking man, and his beard and spectacles were imposing. He was slightly bald, too, which gave him a patriarchal appearance; but to me his face was like his sermons—heavy, sensible, and wanting in animation. Hubert had one very tiresome fault—he could not understand a joke. Jem and I puzzled him dreadfully at times. He would look at us and shake his head, and then go on with some learned disquisition intended for our edification. I am afraid the pupils took advantage of this want of humour, Mr. Vivian especially.

The children were playing under the big mulberry-tree, Hugh in charge of the twins as usual, and Girlie—as baby called herself—toddling over the grass, hand in hand with Wilfred. She screamed with delight and dropped Wilfred's hand at the sight of me. Her big white sun-bonnet had tumbled off, and the rough yellowish curls shone like gold in the sunlight, as she stumped up to me on her little fat legs, and emptied her pinafore into my lap with the lavish generosity of infancy flinging its all with both hands. 'Oo's dot 'em now,' she said, looking lovingly at the cropped daisies and languishing buttercups. How easy to forget one's grievances in the sunshine! As I sat with the children playing round me, I felt that it was a lovely world after all.

The white butterflies were skimming over the flower-beds, and the great brown bees were humming secrets among the hives. Hugh's fantail pigeons were strutting about the roof, and the deep cawing of rooks sounded from the Hall grounds. Some thrushes were singing in the shrubbery, and a pair of linnets were twittering in their nest above us. The freshness and sweetness of early summer were over everything. They would soon be making hay in the Hall meadows. Fircroft was a rambling old house without any pretension to beauty, but the garden was delightful. A tennis-lawn lay before the drawing-room windows, closed round by shrubberies. This led to the Surprise, as the children called a small inner lawn, with a mulberry-tree and a medlar, and surrounded by beds of old-fashioned flowers which bloomed in their season: bushes of spiky lavender and tall gleaming lilies, and lady's lilies and St. John's, spicy carnations and humbler pinks, lupins and hollyhocks, and quaint old monk's-hood; even the much-despised London-pride and sweet-william kept company with sweet peas and nasturtiums—a veritable wilderness of sweets, very

different from the stiff beds of geraniums and verbena which were Hubert's special pride. The Surprise was the children's playground; here on summer afternoons the twins sat in the low branches of the medlar-tree with their favourite dolls, and the black and white kitten, Smut, while Hugh and Wilfred worked in their gardens, and I sat reading or working with dear old Rollo at my feet.

Rollo was my dog. Mr. Vivian had given him to me when he was only a puppy; he was a splendid black retriever with a beautiful head, and was my constant friend and companion. When Jem went to Oxford, Rollo quite seemed to understand that I was in need of sympathy. I have seen him look at me—well, not with actual tears in his eyes, though I do believe dogs cry sometimes, but with such a pathetic expression in them, as though he were sorry for me, and wanted to comfort me in his doggish fashion.

CHAPTER II

THE LADIES AT THE HALL

'What deep interest there would be in the most commonplace society if we could associate with human beings in this wondering, inquiring way, exactly as the chemist interrogates every new subject by innumerable tests, until he has discovered its properties and affinities.'—REV. FREDERICK ROBERTSON.

AN hour afterwards a light, springy step sounded on the gravel path behind me, and a rough tweed coat-sleeve was interposed between me and my work.

'No, Jem, I am not a bit startled!' I returned, coolly keeping the big brown hand prisoner; and then I drew him down beside me with a welcoming smile.

I am afraid it would not be right to call Jem handsome. He was very big, and strong, and brown; but he had not a fine profile like Hubert, and his features were blunt and irregular. But I liked his honest eyes, and his bright smile, and the merry laugh that always seemed to lighten one's heart, and I think I was even more proud than Jem himself of the dear little budding moustache that looked so fine and silky. 'As though it matters whether a man is handsome or not,' as I would say to Kitty, when she vaunted of Hubert's good looks, and wondered why Jem was so different from his brother. In my heart I admired Jem excessively, and thought I had never seen a finer young fellow. I liked his strength and his skill in athletic sports. He was a splendid cricketer and a good oarsman, and he could swim, and shoot, and ride, so it was no wonder that he did not work quite as hard as other men; besides which, he was so popular at Oxford that one need not be surprised if he were just a little bit spoilt.

'What have you been doing all the afternoon, Jem?'

'Oh, Vivian and Campbell and I started for Drayton, but there was something wrong with my bicycle, so I had to come

back—and a precious long walk I had ; and just by the Hall I met Aunt Catherine, and she asked if you would come up to tea, and so I said I would bring you : but it seems that would not do—Mrs. Lyndhurst is not so well as usual, and poor Aunt Catherine looked a bit worried.'

'Do you really think she wants me, Jem?'

'I suppose so,' flinging up his straw hat and catching it again, for Jem could not be still a moment. 'She said, "Olga has not been here for a week, and I am sure Virginia misses her;" the meaning of that is pretty evident.'

'Yes,' hesitating a little ; 'but I don't want to tell Aunt Catherine why I kept away. I think Kitty is a little hurt that they never ask her now—she says it is such a slight, and she complained to Hubert about it : but how can I help it if they like me best?'

'Kitty is a humbug,' returned Jem, in a disgusted tone ; 'as though she, and Hubert too, do not know what you and Aunt Catherine are to each other!'

'Yes, indeed. I have always loved her so,' with tears in my voice. 'I can never forget how kind she was to us both when we first came to Fircroft : she made our life ever so much happier.'

'Of course, she is a trump ; I always told you so. I wish she were our real aunt—don't you, Olga ? I should not mind being her favourite nephew.'

'You mercenary boy ! but there is Mrs. Lyndhurst to consider—the Hall really belongs to her. Aunt Catherine is not such a rich woman, after all ; at least, her sister seems to have the lion's share.'

'Then you are wrong ; they are co-heiresses. But I believe the old squire left in his will, that if either of his daughters had a son, the Hall was to go to him when he came of age. I don't know how they will arrange matters now ; perhaps there may be a chance for me, after all. I shall not a bit mind taking the name of Sefton—that is only a detail ; and then you can come and live with me, and lord it over Kitty.'

'No ; nonsense, Jem ! how you talk ! but I can't stop to listen to you. I shall run across in my garden-hat, and you shall tell Kitty that Aunt Catherine sent me a message ; if I go back to the house there will be another discussion and more grumbling. Oh, Jem, if I were only as free as air !' stretching my arms over my head, and drinking in a deep draught of the sweet summer air.

Jem looked at me with full understanding and sympathy, and

then whistled to Rollo. Nurse had just come in search of the children, so I folded up my work and gave it to her, and then we sauntered down the kitchen-garden, between apple and cherry trees, until we reached a door in the wall. This opened into a green paddock, where our one cow, Ruddy, was feeding. She was a pretty creature, with a soft, tawny coat and great wondering eyes, full of unconscious wisdom, that reminded me of Aunt Catherine's. Ruddy was quite a pet; she followed us all down the paddock in spite of Rollo, and when I turned to stroke her she thrust her cold, wet nose into my hand, and rubbed her horns gently against me.

'If you are late I shall come and fetch you,' were Jem's parting words, as he let me through the gate; and then he leant over it and watched me until I turned the corner, and I could hear him singing the Eton boating song at the top of his voice, as I walked down the elm avenue that led to the Hall.

Brookfield Hall was a gray old house, hardly as pretentious as its name; it had no special beauty of architecture, but it had a staid, venerable look, as though its gray roof had sheltered generation after generation; for even as far back as the time of the blessed martyr Charles,—whose memory I secretly worshipped—many a fair Sefton dame had strolled down the elm avenue and listened to the same cawing of rooks, or had diverted herself with pulling posies in the stiff old garden, where peaches and nectarines still grew against the sunny walls, and where many a generation of peacocks had perched on the mossy sundial.

How Jem and I loved that garden!—though I have heard people call it old-fashioned and out of date, and marvel openly at Miss Sefton's preference for homely flowers. But to Aunt Catherine it was full of historic interest. She loved the smooth grassy terrace, planted with elms, that lay on one side, where a certain Gwendoline Sefton used to meet her Puritan lover. The story ran that the poor young man was killed at Naseby by one of her brothers, Hugh Sefton. Anyhow, he never came again to the terrace. And Gwendoline watched for him evening after evening; and the rooks cawed, and the peacocks screamed from the sundial, and the nightingales sang in the shrubberies, and still she watched for him in the summer moonlight, or when the winter snow lay on the Hall garden, and if any one crossed her path she asked them the same question, 'Have you seen Ralph Annersley, whom they call Ralph the Iron-Heart, for methinks he is long in coming this evening?' For you see she was mad, this poor Gwendoline—crazy with long waiting, and I could not have borne to have listened so often to her story but for the comfort of the end.

For joy came to her on her dying bed, when she was an old woman with hair white as the winter snows; for, as they were praying beside her, she suddenly looked at them, and there was a wonderful light in her eyes, and she ceased her aimless mutterings, and said, in the clearest possible voice, 'Yea, for is it not written, "Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning"? For truly I shall meet my beloved again—my Ralph of the Iron-Heart—in the world where none shall ever say farewell!'

Ah, well! they are reunited now. But how pitiful to think of that long life, filled with one maddening thought, one long waiting for the impossible, the whole of God's fair creation walled up and stifled in one crushed brain! If one were to love like that—God forbid!—it were better to taste death at once. But Gwendoline's story had ever haunted me; and, though I loved the terrace on a fine summer's morning or in the full glory of the afternoon, twilight always banished me from the spot. I could not have paced under those dark trees alone without fancying I heard a soft footfall behind me; and though I have no abject belief in ghosts, still, if a white figure were suddenly to start up and wring its hands, I——

'Dreaming as usual, Olga?'

'Aunt Catherine,' in a confused voice, for there was Miss Sefton standing in my path, and I could see the amused look in her eyes, 'I was thinking of the Lady Gwendoline,' I blurted out. 'What put her into my head, I wonder?' And then Miss Sefton laughed as she kissed me.

'I think Mr. Leigh is right. You are an inveterate dreamer, Olga. We shall have to cure you—Jem and I. But how late you are, my dear; they are bringing in tea, and Virginia has been in the drawing-room for the last hour. Look at these lovely roses. I have been gathering them from my favourite tree. You shall have one of them to enliven your sombre gown. Never mind, it is a very pretty gown'—with an approving smile—'though it is a little too dark to suit you, Olga. But then, you know, I like young people to be gay.'

'Jem asked me the other day why you always wore black, Aunt Catherine,' I observed rather wickedly, as I took the spray of roses from her hand.

'Because a plain, middle-aged woman always looks best in black,' was the imperturbable response. 'Now, Olga'—as I was inclined to contradict this blunt statement—'don't argue on such an uninteresting subject. When I was your age I remember fretting for a good hour because I had overheard some ill-

conditioned visitor speak of me as the plain Miss Sefton, and I bemoaned myself bitterly because I was not as handsome as Virginia. But, my dear, age offers us delicate compensations. We outlive our morbid griefs and youthful ambitions. I should feel no special pang now if any one called me the plain Miss Sefton. I have buried all that,' finished Aunt Catherine quaintly, with the smile that was her great charm, for she knew that Jem and I admired her with all our hearts, with that finest admiration that is born of love.

'She has such a dear face,' as I said once to Jem.

'Yes, awfully jolly, don't you know,' was Jem's answer.

But it was quite true that Aunt Catherine had been no beauty in her youth—one understood that in a moment; but she had a pleasant, thoughtful face, and eyes that were wonderfully young and clear, and her brown hair was just threaded here and there with gray. In spite of her forty-five years, Aunt Catherine was slow in growing old. Her youth lingered strangely; her figure was still almost girlish in its willowy grace; she had not forgotten how to blush at times when she was pleased or excited. There would be a vividness, a depth in her gray eyes that took one by surprise. Now and then there would be bursts of eloquence—picturesque, unrestrained, disjointed—as though something in her nature had been repressed and must find vent.

This made Aunt Catherine so interesting: she had no cut-and-dried formulas of actions; no middle-aged mannerisms—she was so unlike other people. So few persons nowadays dare to assert any special individuality; they prefer a polite, discreet, mummy-like swathing. Now Aunt Catherine was a real, imperfect woman, true to the core, simply because she was herself.

'Mrs. Lyndhurst is not so well to-day, Jem tells me,' I observed as I followed Miss Sefton into the big square hall, somewhat dimly lighted by a large stained window, the handsome oak furniture making it still darker. But I had an odd sort of reverence for those carved cabinets; and what talks Aunt Catherine and I had had on that oak-settle that stood before the great fireplace, now full of fir-cones! In winter a glorious fire was always burning, before which Mrs. Lyndhurst's favourite pug, Nix, loved to bask, curled up on the tiger-skin.

Aunt Catherine shook her head rather sadly at my question.

'She is never well; I think she grows more restless every day. She has much to bear—more than most of us;' and then she threw down her garden-hat and gloves, and, still carrying her roses, led the way to the drawing-room.

'Olga is here,' she observed in a very different voice, into

which a little cheerfulness was evidently forced. 'I hope we have not kept you waiting for your tea, Virginia?'

'What does it matter, Catherine!' was the indifferent reply, as Mrs. Lyndhurst put down her knitting and held out her hand to me with her usual gentle smile. 'How are you, my dear? I am glad to see you. You have not been near us for a week, Olga—a whole week; but I suppose you find us dull company?'

I laughingly disclaimed this speech, and sat down by Mrs. Lyndhurst. I was very fond of her, and very sorry for her; but I did not love her as I did our dear Aunt Catherine. Her nature was a depressing one, especially to young people—trouble had aggravated a naturally low and morbid temperament—and in spite of her gentleness and a sort of attractive softness that was very winning to strangers, I often found Mrs. Lyndhurst exceedingly trying. Diseased sensibility, unhealthy views of life, and the incessant broodings of self-consciousness are singularly repellent to youth. At times I felt a sense of impatience, of critical disapproval. Why had Mrs. Lyndhurst weakly succumbed to her troubles? Why had she suffered them to overmaster and crush her, instead of outliving them as other women did? Why did she burden Aunt Catherine with this weary charge—the responsibility which the stronger and more selfless nature always takes upon itself? Aunt Catherine never spoke of her sister's trouble—never mentioned her except in a tone of divine pity, such as one might use to a sick child. 'Virginia had so much to bear;' and yet the little Brookfield knew of her story hardly accounted for a melancholy that at times bordered on despair. Unhappy marriages have never been rare in England. Many a woman has found wedlock not the state of bliss she imagined it, and has dragged on a miserable and disappointed life; and Mrs. Lyndhurst's married life had been a brief one.

Hubert had told me the little I knew on the subject; but I had no idea how he had gained his information.

The old squire had been a hard-natured man, with an obstinate temper, and a most exaggerated notion of his own importance and dignity. His wife and daughters had been greatly in awe of him, and even Mrs. Lyndhurst, who had been his favourite, had not dared openly to contest his will.

During a winter spent in Rome, a young artist, Paul Lyndhurst by name, had been much in their company, and a secret attachment between him and Virginia had been the result. The only one who was cognisant of the state of affairs was Aunt Catherine, and she pleaded vainly and with tears that her sister should give him up.

'It is an infatuation,' she said over and over again. 'He is not a good man. He is terribly handsome. He has fascinated you with his good looks and cleverness ; but I distrust him, and father will never permit you to marry a poor artist.'

'I will never give him up,' had been Virginia's answer ; 'I love him so that I am ready to die for him.' And, alas ! she made up her mind to live for him. The very day before they left Rome there was a secret marriage, and after a terrible scene, during which Mr. Sefton lashed himself into a state of fury, and forbade his daughter ever to enter his house again, Paul Lyndhurst took his wife away, and for months they did not hear a word of poor Virginia. But one day—about two years after the unlucky marriage, a few months after Mrs. Sefton had died of a lingering disease—Virginia suddenly and unexpectedly made her appearance at the Hall. Hubert could tell me no particulars of that return, or by what means the father's wrath was appeased. Her husband was still living, but she had left him for ever. She looked ill and altered ; indeed, her health seemed permanently broken. Perhaps his wife's death had softened the father's heart, for he did not refuse to take his child back ; and during the last year of his life Virginia was his favourite companion.

This was all I knew, and Aunt Catherine never spoke of the past. From the first she had accepted the sacred charge of her sister's infirmities, and had shaped her own life to meet her sister's requirements.

I looked at Mrs. Lyndhurst as she rose to lay aside her work. She always walked feebly and slowly, as though she were tired to death ; her graceful figure seemed to droop with fatigue. There was something pathetic in her appearance. She always wore a black gown that was almost widow-like in its straight, severe folds ; but there were no delicate white finishes to the neck and cuffs. Instead of that relief she generally wore a black lace scarf wound loosely round her slim throat ; this gave a strange contrast to her pale, sad face and silvery hair. Her eyes were dark and soft, and would have been beautiful except for their unrestful look.

'Mrs. Lyndhurst always looks as though she has lost something,' Kitty once said in her shrewd way.

I was foolish enough to repeat this speech to Aunt Catherine. I noticed that she coloured, as though the remark did not please her.

'She has lost her life's happiness,' she returned gently. 'Mrs. Leigh is right ; but there are some losses that cannot be made up in this world—my poor Virginia's is one of these.'

The drawing-room at the Hall was a charming room, with

three windows opening on the Italian garden, as it was called—a straight stone terrace, with antique vases, leading down by steps to a long gravel walk bordered by gay flower-beds: this led to the Lady's Walk. On the other side was the old Elizabethan garden, with the sunny south wall where the peaches grew, and where the peacock plumed himself on the sundial: this was Aunt Catherine's special garden. Mrs. Lyndhurst, who had no love for flowers, preferred the elm avenue and the terrace where her unhappy ancestress had walked. I thought Mrs. Lyndhurst looked unusually ill this evening: her eyes were bright and feverish. She seemed disposed to be talkative. Aunt Catherine, on the contrary, was somewhat silent.

'You are looking very well, Olga.'

'I am perfectly well, thank you—in a state of rude health, as Jem expresses it.'

'I hope Mrs. Leigh is well also?'

'Kitty is only so-so; she is rather thin, and does far too much, and then Hubert worries himself about her. It is such a pity people cannot be sensible, Mrs. Lyndhurst, but that they will always attempt the proverbial last straw—Kitty always does.'

'She has an anxious mind, I suppose;' but evidently Mrs. Lyndhurst had not listened to my little tirade; she was following out some thought of her own, for she spoke absently.

'Olga,' she continued in a different tone, 'do you think your sister-in-law could spare you? We have such a nice plan in our heads, Catherine and I. May I tell Olga about it, Catherine?'

I thought Aunt Catherine seemed a little startled at the question.

'There is no hurry, is there, dear?' she returned gently. 'I never thought you meant to speak to the child this evening.'

'No hurry!' repeated Mrs. Lyndhurst irritably; 'that is what you always say, Catherine—next week, next month, a year hence, what does it matter to you?' with a singular inflection on the last word; 'and yet you told Dr. Langham yesterday that it was all arranged.'

'And so it is arranged. Please do not excite yourself, Virginia. Have I ever gone from my word yet? Olga,' turning to me with the worried look I knew so well, that always told me so plainly that Mrs. Lyndhurst had been unusually *exigente*, 'my sister wants me to tell you about our plan. I have to go abroad next month on business—a little family matter that has to be settled,' and Aunt Catherine spoke somewhat nervously. 'Virginia does not like me to go alone, and St. Croix is a very pretty place. You have always wanted to see something of

foreign life—do you think your brother and Mrs. Leigh could spare you? It shall be no expense to you, I can promise you that, and I shall be very glad of your companionship;’ and here she paused and looked at me inquiringly, and I suppose my face was sufficient answer. ‘You would like it, Olga?’

‘To shake off Brookfield dust for once in my life! Oh, if only Jem were here now! To go to St. Croix—with you—you! Oh, I must kiss you, Aunt Catherine! You are such a dear, you know! If only it is not too good to be true!’

Mrs. Lyndhurst smiled benevolently over my girlish rhapsodies; but why did Aunt Catherine look so grave—she who loved to give young people pleasure? She even drew back, in a pained sort of way, when I kissed her.

‘I am going on business, Olga; you must understand that.’

‘As though that matters to Olga,’ interposed Mrs. Lyndhurst anxiously; ‘there is nothing to prevent her amusing herself. Strange to say, my dear,’ addressing herself to me, ‘we have some English friends living at St. Croix, and they have agreed to let us have their house. Mrs. Milner’s father, a clergyman in Liverpool, is ill—dying, they fear—and they wish to come to England. The house is ours for three months if we like.’

‘But surely you are not going to St. Croix for three months, Aunt Catherine!’ I exclaimed.

‘I should think not. I have fixed no time; perhaps a week or two may settle my business. I should not care to leave Virginia longer than I could help. If I could only have persuaded her to come, too!’ and here Aunt Catherine looked wistfully at her sister.

Mrs. Lyndhurst’s pale face grew paler than ever at this appeal.

‘What do you mean, Catherine?’ she said, in an alarmed voice; ‘have we not talked over all that—you and I? Do you not know me better than to propose it? Do you think I have strength for such a journey?’

‘Dr. Langham has always recommended a sea-voyage. It is only twelve hours, Virginia.’

‘It would kill me—I tell you it would kill me! You are cruel, Catherine, to agitate me in this way. Nothing will induce me to leave the Hall. If you do not wish to go, say so. I have no right to overburden you. But the child will be disappointed, and the Milners too, for they thought everything was settled.’

‘And so it is settled, my dear Virginia. What can you mean? Have I not promised you solemnly to settle this business as well as I can? Perhaps you could have made it easier for me, if you could have overcome your nervous dread of the journey; but we

will not say any more about that. Olga, when you go home, perhaps you will speak to your brother and Mrs. Leigh about this. Or shall I call and ask them myself? You are not of age yet, you know,' with a faint smile—why was Aunt Catherine so unlike herself?—'and then there is Jem to consider.'

'Jem has a tutorship,' I replied quickly. 'He leaves Fircroft next week.'

'And most likely I shall start the week after. Well, settle it as you like, my dear; but I will undertake to talk over your brother, and if Mrs. Leigh should be obdurate, you must send for me.'

Aunt Catherine got up in a hurry, and said she must put her roses in water; but I think she wanted to end the conversation, so I took the hint, and observed that Jem would be waiting for me. And then Aunt Catherine said that if I would wait a few minutes she would walk down the avenue with me.

CHAPTER III

AUNT CATHERINE

'Like alone acts upon like. Therefore do not amend by reasoning, but by example; approach feeling by feeling; do not hope to excite love except by love. Be what you wish others to become. Let yourself, and not your words, preach.'—AMIEL'S JOURNAL.

I THOUGHT Mrs. Lyndhurst looked uneasy at this proposition, but she said nothing until Aunt Catherine had carried away her flowers; when the door closed she beckoned me to her.

'You are pleased with my little plan, Olga?'

'Is it your plan, Mrs. Lyndhurst? Oh yes, I am delighted! I shall not be able to sleep to-night; but are you sure Aunt Catherine wants me to go?'

'I think, after all, it was she who proposed it. We were talking over Mrs. Milner's letter with Dr. Langham. Women cannot do without a man to advise them, and Dr. Langham has always been our confidant. He was laying down the law to us after his usual fashion. Catherine must not go alone—she would be dull, and all that sort of thing; she must have some one to make things cheerful for her. And then Catherine said, "Very well, I will ask Olga to go. She has never been out of England, and the change will do her good;" and Dr. Langham gave a hearty assent, for you are a great favourite of his, my dear. Indeed, if he were only a little younger——' and then she looked at me meaningly, and of course I laughed, for this was an old joke—a very old joke indeed.

Poor Mrs. Lyndhurst! as though Jem and I did not know better than that. Why, Brookfield was of a far different opinion; it privately held the notion that if the doctor had been a bolder man he would willingly have aspired to one of the ladies of the Hall, and that he was not indifferent to Miss Sefton's middle-aged

comeliness. Now I cannot vouch for the truth of this ; it might only be village gossip after all. Brookfield, like most villages, was a scandalous little place, and made very free with its neighbour's name. Dr. Langham and Aunt Catherine were the best of friends. I think she had a sort of kindly feeling for him, and compassionated him for his bachelor loneliness ; but as for any other thought, I am sure such a notion would never have entered her head. It was profanity to imagine it. Aunt Catherine was the sort of woman one would never dare to question on such subjects. Mrs. Lyndhurst would have her feeble little jokes ; but I never heard Aunt Catherine talk about love or lovers, except in a very staid, sober way—only something in her manner, in her very avoidance of such topics, made me think she held very solemn views on the subject. Any light talk on such matters displeased her. 'We ought not to joke on sacred things,' I heard her say once ; 'surely love—real love, I mean—is sacred.'

I was not ever likely to know if popular gossip were correct in crediting Dr. Langham with any special tenderness for Aunt Catherine ; but he certainly respected and liked her more than any other woman, and was always ready to help her to the best of his powers. As for Aunt Catherine, she looked on him as a trusted friend, and always consulted him on all difficulties ; besides which, he was the guardian of her sister's health and well-being, and I always suspected that he was deep in their confidence.

'People are afraid of growing old,' she once said to me—'they fear the loss of many of their pleasures ; but I always maintain that every age has its compensation. What can be better, for example, than to watch new friendships grow stronger as we get older, to feel how they ripen and mature with the years ? We no longer fear that the friends of a lifetime will grow weary of us and change ; we have proved them. Do you not recollect, Olga, what your favourite Amiel wrote ? "To know how to grow old is the master-work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living." And then again, and this well applies to the same subject, that hackneyed subject of growing old : "Do not despise your situation ; in it you must act, suffer, and conquer. From every point on earth we are equally near to heaven and to the Infinite." I wish we discontented middle-aged people would take that to heart.'

How I loved the way Aunt Catherine talked ! It was generally when we two were together that she would break out into one of these eloquent little monologues. In mixed company she was rarely talkative ; the light coinage of conventional intercourse

never seemed to elicit much response. With me she was often grave; she liked to give me her views on life, books, duty, or any abstract subject. She called it 'working off steam.' 'My mind is too closely packed,' she said once. 'I have crammed it with miscellaneous reading, and can only assimilate a certain amount of intellectual nourishment. The other day I was very much struck by a remark Robertson made in one of his letters. I have copied it out for you, Olga. He says, "Multifarious reading weakens the mind more than doing nothing, for it becomes a necessity at last, like smoking, and is an excuse to the mind to lie dormant; whilst thought is poured in, and runs through, a clear stream, over unproductive gravel, on which not even mosses grow. It is the idlest of all idlenesses, and has more of impotency than any other."'

Aunt Catherine was certainly not in one of her talking moods when, after a brief delay, she joined me in the avenue; for though she took my arm in her old way, she did not once break the silence until the road was in sight, and then my impatience was not to be repressed any longer.

'Aunt Catherine,' I burst out in a tone of mingled affection and vexation, 'I do wish you would tell me what is troubling you; you are not a bit like yourself this evening. I am sure that you are not going to St. Croix for your pleasure or convenience; some one is putting some troublesome business on your shoulders, and you are too kind to refuse to help. That is always the way; you never think of your own comfort.'

'I think I told you that I was not going to St. Croix for pleasure, Olga.'

'But can no one else do the business?'

'Only Virginia, and you can see for yourself how the mere idea harasses her. She has never slept out of the Hall for a single night these last five-and-twenty years; it is one of her unhealthy fancies that any change would be bad for her. I think I love my home as much as any one, but I like to go away sometimes, if only for the pleasure of coming back. One has such a luxurious feeling of home-sickness towards the last, and that makes the welcome all the sweeter. I do not think any sound is more melodious to me than the cawing of our own rooks on the first evening of my return, after I have been away a week or two.'

'How can you help loving such a beautiful home? I wish I could feel as much affection for Fircroft. I am far too glad to leave it. Aunt Catherine, are you sure that I shall be any comfort to you; that there is no one else whose company you would prefer?'

'No; you suit me exactly—how often have I told you that, Olga!'

'It is very strange,' I returned musingly; 'I often wonder how you can find pleasure in the society of an insignificant girl—a clever woman like you!' and then Aunt Catherine did summon up a smile.

'You are not insignificant, Olga; the word does not suit you in the least; you have far too much individuality. Liking becomes a habit, I believe, and I have grown to love you as my own child. This sort of adoption is very sweet. Single women are often lonely; but I have come to think that it is their own fault. With a world full of human beings, there must be some whom they can love and take into their life!'

'I know I owe all my happiness to you,' I returned gratefully. We had retraced our steps, and were still walking over the crisp, short turf under the elms. 'I should have had such a different life without you. Think what it would be if the Hall and you and Mrs. Lyndhurst were effaced from my existence! How meagre and unsatisfactory everything would be! Only Hubert and Kitty and the children; just dull prose—not a bit of poetry! Oh, the treats you have given us! Jem and I count them up sometimes. Do you recollect those weeks at Hastings?'

'To be sure I do; you and Jem behaved like a couple of babies.'

'We were children let out of school. Oh, what fun we had! And then last summer, when you and I stayed at the Randolph, was not that a glorious time? If I live to a hundred I do not think I shall ever forget the quadrangle at Magdalen, with the moonlight silvering everything; and that afternoon in Addison's Walk! And do you recollect how we came back to Jem's room to tea, and the dark young man, whom they called the Atheist, dropped in, and he was not an Atheist at all—not even an Agnostic—though he had some queer ideas of his own. All Jem's friends fell in love with you, Aunt Catherine; they could not help themselves. I was just nobody—only Leigh's sister; that was what they called me—Leigh's sister. It was Miss Sefton round whom they crowded, even the Atheist; but as for poor little me, I was just Leigh's sister—that was all.'

This sort of talk was doing Aunt Catherine good; to certain fine natures nothing gives greater pleasure than to be reminded that their very existence creates joy for some lives. Aunt Catherine was never satisfied with purely personal enjoyment; she was essentially a lady in its old-fashioned, Saxon meaning—the *Hlāfweardige*, the bread-keeper—only she liked to break her loaf

with others, to be perpetually dispensing largesse. I have often heard her groan over the burden of her own wealth. 'There is too much,' she would say piteously, 'there is far too much for Virginia and me to spend on our two selves. We have neither of us any luxurious tastes—Virginia does not understand art, neither do I. We have no kin—what is the use of filling the Hall with beautiful things just for us to enjoy, when we do not know who is to succeed us. If——' but here her face clouded, and a sort of wistful look came into her eyes, but she did not finish her sentence—'If she had married and had children,' is that what she would have said?

Aunt Catherine had resumed her natural manner now, she even volunteered to be more explicit.

'I know you think me unsatisfactory this evening, Olga,' she observed by and by, when we had reached the Hall for the second time; 'but the fact is I am very much worried. Virginia, poor dear, is a little unpractical. She and Dr. Langham insist on my having a companion during my stay at St. Croix, and without a moment's hesitation I fixed on you; and now Virginia is unwilling that you should be told the object of our journey. Perhaps, in my heart, I am as unwilling as she; but how are you to be any help or comfort to me if I may not repose confidence in you? You will go your way and I shall go mine, and there will be no question of pleasure for either of us; when you see me worried you will not venture to question me, and as for me, my lips will be closed. "Why need we tell any one?" that is all she says—you know Virginia's way.'

I must confess I was somewhat hurt at this. They were so much to me, these two dear women, and I was so much to them; and now Mrs. Lyndhurst had judged me to be unworthy of their confidence. I was only a girl, only Olga; it was safer to be silent!

Aunt Catherine looked in my face, and read my thoughts.

'No, you are not unworthy of our confidence,' she said quickly; 'if you are young you are reliable. Virginia knows that as well as I do. But there are difficulties, complications: it is a troublesome sort of business—you must let me think over it quietly. If I make up my mind that it is necessary to tell you, Virginia will have to yield, for I shall go only on my own terms. I think, after all, the chief difficulty consists in my own reluctance to tell a painful story.'

Of course, after this there was nothing more to be said, and I was ready to go to St. Croix in passive ignorance if she wished it. Nothing could really cloud the pleasure of our intercourse. I was

not particularly curious by nature, or given to meddle in other folk's business, whatever Jem might insinuate to the contrary; so I only begged Aunt Catherine not to disturb herself. 'Whatever you decide will be right,' I observed conclusively, when at last I bade her good-bye.

I wanted Jem to be the first to hear my wonderful piece of news, but to my disappointment he was playing tennis with Hubert, and Kitty was sitting in her long cane chair outside the drawing-room window watching them. She was wrapped in her favourite gray woollen shawl, and looked very tired and bored. I knew just as well as though I had heard him, that Hubert had coaxed her to put away her work and rest a little—he had made her believe that he would enjoy his game all the more if she were looking on, and it was not in her wifely soul to refuse compliance with his request after such a compliment.

'Forty—love,' shouted Jem, for he always beat Hubert, and then he waved to me with his racquet, and Kitty looked up at me with a dubious sort of smile.

'You might have told me you were going to the Hall,' were her first words as I sat down beside her.

'Mights' and 'oughts' made up a great part of Kitty's conversation.

'I was in the Surprise when Jem brought me Aunt Catherine's message,' was my suave answer, for I could afford to be good-natured this evening, 'and it was too much trouble to come up to the house. Jem told you where I was gone?'

'Yes, Jem told me when I was tired of wondering why you did not come in to tea. Of course, you are your own mistress, Olga' (I wish I were); 'but you might have thought I should like to send a message.' (A second 'might,' now for an 'ought.') 'I wish you were more thoughtful in little things.'

I took no notice of this dignified rebuke, which meant that Kitty would have liked an invitation too.

'It is such a warm evening,' I observed carelessly, 'how can you muffle yourself in that shawl?'

'I am never warm now,' she replied, and she actually shivered as she spoke. 'Hubert wanted me to sit out here; but I would much rather go in—I have not half finished my work;' but here she caught Hubert's eye, or, more truly, the gleam of his eyes through his spectacles, and nodded and smiled at him in her old sprightly way.

What a pretty creature she had been when Hubert first brought her home! Even now, when anything pleased her and she looked bright and animated, and the colour came to her face, and her eyes

got dark and big, she reminded me of the Kitty of old. I do not believe Hubert noticed the change in her; he admired her as much as ever in his simple, honest way. I have seen him gazing at her through his spectacles in the most lover-like manner; and, to do her justice, she admired him just as much in return.

'I wish Hubert played as well as Jem,' she said rather disconsolately, as another 'fifteen—thirty' reached our ears. 'Jem has been beating him all the time, and yet Hubert is so fond of the game.'

'I don't believe Hubert minds being beaten. He knows Jem is a crack player, as Harry calls him. He should not play single against Jem; they are not evenly matched. Mr. Cunningham is a better opponent for Hubert.'

'I should like him to win one game,' returned Kitty rather pathetically, as her eyes followed the two players. 'I daresay you think me foolish, but you will understand it yourself, one day, how one likes one's husband to win.'

'Even in a game,' rather sarcastically, for I thought pathos a little out of place here.

To bring strong feelings into the trifling amusements of life seemed to me as wise as children playing at soldiers with real swords; we should be sure to cut and wound each other all day long. But, then, Kitty never liked Jem to excel in anything. It was my private opinion that she shut her eyes wilfully to Hubert's slowness, and that she 'made believe,' as children say, that he was the wisest and cleverest of men.

I thought it better to change the subject, for really Jem was playing splendidly. His lithe, agile figure seemed literally to bound over the grass; he never seemed to miss a ball. Hubert was blundering more than usual; so I distracted Kitty's attention by telling her of Aunt Catherine's proposition.

She listened to me in silence.

'You are a very fortunate girl, Olga,' she said, when I had finished my recital; 'people always seem to take a fancy to you;' and here she paused and looked at me in a critical sort of way.

'I wonder why people take a fancy to you?' was evidently her unuttered thought.

'I am sure I don't know,' was my careless answer; but Kitty started and coloured as though I had read her truly.

'Of course, you are very nice, dear,' she went on, with ready repentance. 'When I was a girl people took a fancy to me too; but that is so long ago.'

'You were so pretty that people could not help falling in love with you.'

'Well, I suppose not,' was her candid answer; for, with all her faults, Kitty was singularly devoid of vanity. She liked Hubert to admire her, but, with that exception, she cared little for compliments. 'But many people think you are nice-looking, too, Olga—that is, when you take pains with yourself.'

'Thank you, Kitty,' I returned gratefully, for I knew that she had done her utmost for me in that sentence. My glass had long ago told me that I was no beauty, and Jem's brotherly frankness had not left room for doubts.

'Hubert is the only good-looking one of the family,' he said once; 'for a girl you are very so-so; your complexion is all right, but your upper lip is too long, and your nose is just what a nose ought not to be, and your forehead is too high. I like a forehead to be like Clytë's, low and broad. Yes, your eyes are nice—but there, what does it matter? we are all as fond of you as though you were a daughter of Venus,' and after this speech I had no further illusions on the subject of my personal beauty.

'Aunt Catherine is anxious to know if you can spare me,' I went on, for Kitty seemed in such a comfortable frame of mind. Unfortunately this seemingly harmless remark grazed her sensibilities too closely. I knew by the way she pursed up her pretty little mouth—Kitty had such a pretty mouth—that she was thinking of Jem's unlucky speech.

'Do you think I should allow my selfish considerations to stand in your way, Olga? I wonder what Jem would say if I deprived you of such a treat; all the same,' relenting visibly, 'I shall miss you dreadfully, and so will the poor children. I think you have spoilt us by being so good to us.'

Could I believe my ears?

'Do you really mean that you will miss me, Kitty?—that sounds almost too nice to be true.'

'Have I been such an unkind sister that you do not believe in my affection? I did not think you would have misunderstood a few sharp speeches,' and here there were actually tears in her eyes. 'I have always been fond of you, Olga—always; you have such nice ways with the children, and you never seem to think anything a trouble. Of course it is very dull for you here—Hubert says so sometimes. You are clever, and I am not a companion for you; but I want to do my best for you, and so does Hubert, and he is goodness itself, although he is not Jem.'

Now what could I do but kiss her and tell her that she was a dear little soul, and that of course I was as fond of her as possible? and so I was, though she never gave me any real comfort. Very sensitive people always remind me of a hedgehog: there is no

going near them without pricking one's self against their bristles.

'What has become of Hugh?' I exclaimed, after we had gone through this little scene of reconciliation. I always thought Kitty loved scenes.

'He is learning his imposition in the schoolroom. He did his lessons very badly this afternoon, and so Hubert kept him in.'

I sighed; poor little Hugh was so often kept in—he had inherited his father's slowness. Hubert had been stupid as a child. I wonder why the parents did not remember this; kind as they were to all their children, they were disposed to be hard on Hugh. He was my favourite. Wilfred was a dear little fellow, and the twins, Jessie and Mab, were bright, pretty little girls, but none of them came up to Hugh in my estimation. He was such an unselfish, tender-hearted boy, so devoted to his parents and to his brother and sisters. I have known him go without things—his share of fruit or sweets—that the twins might have more; perhaps he was not clever, but he was the most perfect little gentleman—no one ever heard him say a rough word; all the pupils were fond of him, because he was always ready to do them a service; in his childish way, for he was only nine, Hugh had a passion for service.

Poor Hugh shed many tears over his own stupidity. He could not learn as quickly as other boys of his age, and I used to fancy that Hubert was a little exacting; his boy's lack of brain seemed a reproach to himself. I used to speak to Kitty sometimes on the subject, but I never could get her to see with my eyes. In the first place, she would have to blame Hubert, a piece of presumption that never entered her head; and in the second place, she would have to take her son's part against his father—an equally impossible proceeding; so she always silenced me with the same speech: 'Hubert knows best; it is not for me to interfere with my husband.' For Kitty always got the best of an argument: when every means failed, she rolled herself round in certain stereotyped feminine aphorisms, much as the hedgehog afore mentioned transforms himself into a dust-coloured, spiky ball; and 'Hubert knows best' clinched the most obstinate discussion.

CHAPTER IV

AN EVENING AT FIRCROFT

'I do believe that there ought to be more interest in humanity, and more power of throwing one's self into the mind of every one, so that no visit should appear dull.'—REV. FREDERICK ROBERTSON.

JUST at this moment Hubert threw up his racket with a despairing groan, but Jem promptly and figuratively patted him on the back.

'Cheer up, old man ; you will do better next time. You did not play so badly last set.'

'It is no use playing against this fellow,' observed Hubert ruefully ; 'he has beaten me hollow, as usual. Never mind, I will have my revenge yet.'

'All right,' returned Jem cheerfully, as he threw himself down on the grass by my side, looking quite cool and fresh in comparison with Hubert's flushed face. 'Well, what have you two young women been talking about all this time?'

'I was just going to ask the same question,' put in Hubert, who had taken possession of the sole remaining chair.

Now we were both of us longing to tell the same story. I—because it was my own peculiar and legitimate piece of property, being both eye and ear witness of the whole affair ; and Kitty—because she always liked to monopolise Hubert's attention—and to be the channel through which he should receive all interesting communications. Knowing this peculiarity of Kitty, and being bent on being the spokeswoman on the present occasion, I commenced at racing speed ; notwithstanding which, Kitty's interpolations tripped me up every minute much as follows :

'Oh, Hubert, I have such a delightful piece of news to tell you ! Do listen, Jem, and don't tear my new print gown with your clumsy foot.'

'Yes, indeed, I call it a piece of good fortune, Hubert,' from Kitty.

'Aunt Catherine is going to St. Croix on business——'

'Most important business,' corrected Kitty.

'And she has asked me to accompany her.'

'And Olga will not have a farthing of expense. Think of that, dear!'

'Some friends of theirs, the Milners, have let their house to Aunt Catherine for three months.'

'But we could not spare Olga all that time, could we? and, indeed, Miss Sefton would not require her nearly so long,' from the irrepressible Kitty.

But I frowned her down, and went on:

'St. Croix is a lovely place, about two miles from the town of St. Genette, and the house is delightfully situated; but Aunt Catherine would not describe it to me. And there are several nice English families, only Aunt Catherine says she will have no time for visiting, and she has particularly desired the Milners not to ask their friends to call.'

'I am afraid that will be a little dull for Olga; she does so love society.'

'Aunt Catherine purposes to start early next month, and I am to get my things ready; and she hopes, Hubert——'

'Of course you can have no objection, dear? Olga is her own mistress, and it will be such a nice change for her.'

'Dear me, Kitty, I think you had better finish yourself, for Hubert is staring at us both as though he were utterly bewildered,' which was the fact—he was looking at us blankly through his spectacles; his slow comprehension had evidently not groped its way to a full understanding.

'I think if you were to talk one at a time——' he said helplessly.

And then Jem gave me such a look! He once observed, rather profanely, in my hearing, that he wondered Hubert had been ordained at the usual age, as he must have been twice as long as other men in making up his mind about the Articles of the Christian Faith, 'though I will say this for him,' finished the irreverent boy, 'that when he had once settled what to believe, he would stick to it for the rest of his life.'

'Poor old duffer!' Jem's look said so plainly that I burst out laughing, and Kitty looked a little offended. I knew by the way she bridled her neck and elevated her little white chin, that no amount of pressure would induce her to say another word on the subject; so, as Jem afterwards remarked, I had my innings, and

could put the whole matter plainly before Hubert. He was very much pleased when he fully understood it all, and expressed himself as being very grateful to Aunt Catherine for her kindness to me.

'She is a good creature,' he observed feelingly, 'and I am very much obliged to her.'

'She is a darling!' ejaculated Jem, under his breath.

'I think we ought to call at the Hall and thank her, Kitty. Will you go with me to-morrow afternoon, my dear, and then we can inquire after Mrs. Lyndhurst?'

'I think you had better go alone, Hubert,' returned Kitty, with a touch of her old plaintiveness. 'I am afraid I am out of favour at the Hall, for they never ask me now. The only one they want is Olga—they make that very evident.'

'Stuff—nonsense!' broke from Jem's lips. He was never tolerant of Kitty's morbid fancies. 'You are a pretty sort of clergyman's wife, Kitty, to let your husband pay all his pastoral visits alone. I thought a clergyman advocated charity, and all that sort of thing, and here you are harassing the curate-in-charge with doubts about his parishioners. I will wager my best hat that Miss Sefton, and Mrs. Lyndhurst, too, will be delighted to see you to-morrow. If I were you, Hubert, I would make her go. What is the good of being a husband if one can't order one's wife about?'

Strange to say, Kitty did not take umbrage at this plain speech, though Hubert looked alarmed at Jem's audacity.

'Of course I shall go if Hubert wishes it,' was all she said; and Hubert looked as delighted as though she had paid him the choicest compliment. It was such a pity Hubert had so little tact. He did not in the least understand how to manage Kitty. In spite of her little tempers and tiresome ways, she was a good little creature at the bottom. Jem would have made her a much better husband; he would have tyrannised over her in a good-natured way, and rooted out all her fancies, and dominated her for her own good, and there would have been an end of all these weary discussions and misunderstandings.

The gong sounded as we reached this point in our conversation, and we could hear the young men racing down the passages on their way to their rooms.

'We must go and change, Jem,' and Hubert started up, and Kitty and I followed them more leisurely.

But I had not forgotten poor little Hugh, and I hurried up to the schoolroom to see how he was getting on with his imposition. Contrary to my expectations, I heard voices, and on opening the

door I was surprised to see Harry Vivian sitting on the school-room table with Hugh's slate in his hand, and Hugh standing beside him with a radiant face.

'Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Vivian; I quite understand it now.'

'All right, little 'un; now go and show it to your governor.'

And then he caught sight of me, and jumped up with a boyish blush on his face, as though he had been discovered in some wrong-doing.

'Have you been helping Hugh, Mr. Vivian? That is very good of you.'

'Yes; isn't he awfully kind, auntie? He has been here ever so long showing me how to do my lesson.'

'Well, it was hard lines on him, poor little chap, being mewed up on such a lovely evening. Now, do as I tell you, Hugh: go and show your imposition to Mr. Leigh, and then run out in the garden.'

And Hugh, with a grateful look at his friend, tucked his books under his arm, and ran downstairs to his father's dressing-room.

'I wish Mr. Leigh were not quite so strict with the little fellow,' observed Mr. Vivian, as soon as he found himself alone with me. 'I beg your pardon if I am saying too much, but I always think both he and Mrs. Leigh are rather hard on the boy; they don't give him credit for his good intentions. He does his work to the best of his ability, and we are not all blessed with the same amount of brains.'

'I agree with you,' I assented warmly; 'thank you so much for helping the poor child. I am quite as grateful to you as he is.'

'Nonsense; I liked doing it, don't you know. I have not forgotten how a boy feels under these circumstances. Must you go, Miss Leigh? What have you been doing all the afternoon—taking a walk with Rollo?'

'I am going to leave Rollo in a week or two; will you be very good to him in my absence?' and I gave Mr. Vivian a hasty sketch of my plans. His face fell at once.

'You are going away, Miss Leigh, and we do not break up until the second of August—nearly a whole month without you; what shall Rollo and I do?'

'You will do excellently well,' was my unfeeling reply. 'Rollo will miss me, of course—dear old fellow—because he is my constant companion; but, now I come to think of it, why should I not take him with me? Miss Sefton will not mind. Yes, Rollo shall go too; he shall take his first sea-voyage, and see

foreign life with his mistress. Oh, how delightful !' and I clapped my hands in pure girlish glee.

'You care more about that dog than you do for the whole of us put together,' returned Mr. Vivian reproachfully. 'You are so different from other girls ; one cannot make the least impression on you.'

'*Au revoir, monsieur,*' I replied lightly, making him a profound curtsy, and the next minute I was in the passage.

We all liked Harry Vivian, he was such a nice, gentlemanly boy—young man, I suppose I ought to say, for he was twenty. He had been in bad health for some years, and this had retarded his education ; but since his recovery he had made up for lost time, and was now working to some purpose. Hubert was in hope that he would be ready for his matriculation in a few months. He and Jem were great friends ; they had the same tastes and opinions. I liked him immensely ; indeed, I preferred him to the other two pupils. Mr. Campbell was handsome, but he was decidedly stupid ; and Mr. Cunningham was unpleasantly rich, and thought too much of himself in consequence ; but Harry—I called him Harry to Jem—was always nice and good-natured and ready to do kind things, and if only he would not try to make pretty speeches ; but that was so like a boy, and I suppose he could not help his nature—only it sometimes gave me a good deal of trouble to keep him in proper order. I could not help laughing, as I dressed myself, at the remembrance of his long face. 'Nearly a whole month without you !' Poor boy ! I am the only girl about, so he thinks he is obliged to fall in love with me. How Jem would chaff him if he knew ; but he is too nice a boy, and I will keep his little secret for him. Why, Kitty had half a dozen lovers before she was eighteen, and I am a whole year older, and, with the exception of Harry Vivian, no one has ever paid me a single compliment ; but 'when a person has too long an under lip and a nose that is everything a nose ought not to be,' recalling Jem's severe criticism, 'that fact need excite no special wonder ;' and in this philosophic frame of mind I finished my toilet.

The dinner-hour at Fircroft was always the most wearisome to me in the twenty-four. Hubert's bland conversation, somewhat tinged with pomposity, seemed to cast a dead-weight over everything. His twofold character of pastor and master invested him with added dignity ; and with Kitty in her pretty evening dress at the other end of the table, drinking in his words of wisdom as though he were Solon and Solomon combined, no wonder he seemed to expand with mingled importance and benevolence. I always sat between Hubert and Mr. Cunningham—a position I

hated. If Hubert's rounded sentences were not to my taste, Mr. Cunningham's remarks were even less so. I never knew a young man so entirely satisfied with himself. He ought to have married Miss Kilmanseg with her golden leg, for every word related directly or indirectly to what regenerate souls term filthy lucre. Egotism eked out with a stammer and an eye-glass had little attraction for me.

'Have you heard from home lately, Mr. Cunningham?' I would remark, with an attempt to be gracious.

'Yes—my—my—father wrote. He—he—has had a stroke of luck—made a pot of m-m-money lately;' and thereupon would follow some stuttering account of speculations or investments which I did not pretend to understand, or anecdotes of 'my hunter, my dogs, my people.'

I never knew any one so fond of the possessive pronoun. When Jem was at home things were far better. He always sat opposite to me, and when Hubert was unusually prosy we would telegraph our amusement to each other, or Jem would strike into the conversation; he was the only one who dared to contradict the master of the house.

'Come, come, we have had enough of these Greek fellows,' he would say; 'they were precious ruffians, I can tell you. It is too bad to talk shop and hinder our digestion. Did you see Roberts, of Merton, has distinguished himself? He was always a plucky one.' Actually the audacious boy would change the conversation after this fashion. Or he and Harry Vivian, who always followed his lead, would begin a sparring match; witticism would follow witticism. It was droll to see how Hubert looked through his spectacles trying to understand them.

'What do you two fellows mean?' he would ask helplessly. 'I wish you would talk sense, Jem.'

'Only clever people can talk nonsense,' Jem retorted once. 'If you would only try your hand at it for half an hour, Hubert, it would do you a world of good.'

'You have forgotten, then, the great Roman warning: *Nescit vox missa reverti*—that means, Olga,' with explanatory courtesy, 'that a word once uttered is irrevocable.'

Jem shook his head sorrowfully.

'You are crushing butterflies with a garden-roller. Can't you find a lighter implement to brush the powder off our gauzy wings? Vivian looks quite depressed; he is choking with conscious guilt. *Nescit vox missa reverti*. My poor Harry! what is to become of all thy breezy jokes?'

'Really, Jem,' and Hubert drew himself up in an offended

manner, 'there are limits to everything—even to jesting ;' for his feelings were hurt on perceiving his quotation had failed to make its mark. But Jem contrived to soothe him. The brothers were really attached to each other ; but Jem could not always forbear a joke at Hubert's expense. I am afraid he and Harry delighted in getting a 'rise' out of him, as they called it ; and really, to watch his puzzled expression over one of Jem's ridiculous jokes was enough to make one die with laughing. No, the dinner-hour was never dull when Jem was at Fircroft.

It was our habit—Jem's and mine, I mean—to escape the tedium of the drawing-room circle as often as we could, and retire to the garden, where Harry would join us.

Hubert and Mr. Campbell generally played chess—a game of which they were both passionately fond ; but Hubert, who was a strict disciplinarian even in trifles, had laid down the law that music was a necessary part of every evening's entertainment. Mr. Cunningham played the flute atrociously, and Harry had lately taken lessons on the violin ; so Kitty and I were in requisition as accompanists to these misguided young men. To add to our misery, Mr. Campbell had recently discovered he had a fine bass voice. The adjective 'fine' was dubious ; but, alas ! the voice was undeniable, and the game of chess was often curtailed in order that Mr. Campbell's sonorous notes might be heard and admired.

Now, a musical evening made to order, and with indifferent musicians, has always been my abomination of abominations ; and yet I protest, by the shades of Beethoven and Handel, that I am a devout lover of music ; but a cut-and-dried routine of badly-executed pieces, wherein the same faults recur every evening, was enough to sicken any one. Kitty was far more patient under the ordeal.

'That's right, Kitty, my dear ; you and Cunningham played that last piece very well. Bravo, Cunningham ! that does you credit, really ;' and Hubert, who had not the least ear for music, and whose nervous system was proof against any amount of diabolic squeaks and quavers, though even Rollo protested against them in his doggish way, would beam on the complacent youth who had just distinguished himself.

'I make a point of encouraging my pupils' musical tastes,' I heard Hubert once say to an anxious parent. 'Nothing humanises young men more, or attracts them to domesticity. My wife and sister are accomplished pianists' (oh, Hubert, what a fib ! though certainly Kitty had a pretty touch), 'and our evenings are delightful. We have the flute, the violin—quite an orchestra.'

Who ever heard a flute in an orchestra, you silly fellow ?

I was bent on making my escape this evening, so I whispered to Jem as he opened the door for us after dinner:

'Get rid of Harry; I want you all to myself;' and he nodded in his quick way.

Jem always understood me in a moment. I found him waiting for me in the hall a minute later.

'Don't go into the garden, Olga,' he said; 'Campbell and Vivian are smoking their cigarettes out there. Let us take a turn in the elm avenue instead; no one will find us there;' and of course I consented to his proposition.

We had so much to talk about that I am sure we walked miles before we had half exhausted the subject. Jem was full of my projected journey to St. Croix—he always took an interest in my smallest concerns—and he wanted me to tell him everything Aunt Catherine had said.

I was so full of my recital, and Jem was so nice and sympathetic, that I took no notice of where we were going; but all of a sudden I awoke to full consciousness. The elms, with the slumbering rooks, were no longer over our heads; we were walking down a side-path in the Italian garden, and just before us was the Lady's Walk, looking more sombre and mysterious than ever in the moonlight.

'Jem,' I remonstrated, 'why have you brought me here? You know nothing on earth will induce me to enter the Lady Gwendoline's Walk.'

'What nonsense, Olga! Do you mean you are afraid to go there with me?' And Jem's voice had a touch of scorn that nettled me in spite of my nervousness.

'I would rather not. Don't be tiresome. Every one has his or her special fancy. I cannot bear that ghostly terrace. I always imagine—— Oh, Jem—Jem! what is that?' And I pinched his arm in my agitation, for, as though my nervousness had found its actual embodiment, a white figure glided from behind the dark trees. Was it Lady Gwendoline waiting for her Puritan lover, Ralph of the Iron-Heart? 'Oh, Jem!'

'Hush, Olga! don't be a fool.' Jem was just a little rough with me because my paleness alarmed him. 'What a goose you are! don't you see it is Mrs. Lyndhurst?'

Mrs. Lyndhurst! I recovered in a moment. Of course it was she, only she looked so strange and unlike herself. Her black gown was hidden under a loose white burnous, and she had drawn its hood over her gray hair, so that she really looked ghost-like in the moonlight. The next minute I begged Jem in a whisper to come away.

'Do come, dear! She will be so vexed if she thinks she is watched. Aunt Catherine has told me so. She often takes solitary walks, and nothing annoys her more than for any one to follow and speak to her. You know she is odd in her ways. She is coming towards us now; what shall we do?'

But Jem, with ready presence of mind, drew me behind a great flowering shrub, that completely hid us, though we could just see through the branches.

How I wished we were safe in our own Surprise! It was so uncanny to be hiding there in the moonlight. Mrs. Lyndhurst was coming towards us with a soft, gliding motion that conveyed no sound; her pale face was paler than ever, and there was a fixed look upon it, as though some sad thought dominated her. Just as she was opposite to us—opposite our hiding-place, I mean—she suddenly stopped and wrung her hands, as though with involuntary pain.

'Oh, my sin!' we heard her say—'will it never be condoned in this world? Will there never be an end of all this suspense and misery? Only God knows!'

And then she turned away, and we heard such a heartbroken sigh.

'Now we can go,' whispered Jem eagerly; 'quick, Olga, before she turns.' And, holding my arm tightly, we ran lightly down the garden-paths and gained the avenue; but we neither of us spoke until the Hall was out of sight.

'Oh, Jem! what does it mean?'

'That is not for us to inquire,' was the unexpected response. 'Poor woman, I always guessed that her life had an unhappy secret in it. I never saw sorrow more legibly written on any human countenance.'

'I knew her husband was a bad man.'

'Yes, we all know as much as that; but, Olga, we must forget what has just passed. We must not even let our thoughts dwell on it. Mrs. Lyndhurst imagined that she was alone—you must remember that.'

'But I can never forget her words, Jem.'

'Perhaps not; but I do not mean to think about them. If I can, I will wipe them out of my memory. They shall be to me as though they had not been spoken.'

I knew Jem had a keen sense of honour, but I never felt before how much he was above me in that respect. I am afraid women are often faulty in this respect. I do not mean by this that they would listen at doors, or voluntarily intrude into other folk's conversation, but they are often wanting in the finer points of

honour. I do not fancy a man, for example, would criticise his visitor as soon as the outer door closed on him, and yet I have heard ladies discuss their friends in the most heartless way, and indulge in innuendoes at their expense.

‘Poor dear woman! Yes, we will forget all about it, Olga,’ repeated Jem decisively, as we reached Fircroft.

But though I tried hard to follow this advice, I found it impossible. All that night, waking or dreaming, the words seemed to haunt me: ‘Oh, my sin! will it never be condoned in this world? Will there never be an end of this suspense and misery?’ and ‘only God knows!’ seemed to echo and re-echo through my brain.

CHAPTER V

'SHALL YOU LET ME GO, MOTHER?'

'In no relation does woman exercise so deep an influence, both immediately and prospectively, as in that of mother.'—CARTER.

HUMAN nature is exceeding complex; it is many-sided and Proteus-like in its shifting transformations. There is something mysterious, almost baffling, in seeing any one we know intimately under an entirely new aspect—the sudden metamorphosis startles and alarms our inner consciousness in much the same way that a flash of lightning dazzles our outward vision. The arrowy brightness of electricity illuminates the darkness, bringing sombre depths and unknown objects into strange significance; but before we can grasp the meaning of the spectacle the weird effect is swallowed up in the blackness of vacancy.

In the same way human nature suddenly reveals itself; in a moment some unseen force or agency, some combination of circumstance at once grotesque and terrible, asserts its power; with a shock, an upheaval as of an earthquake, our foregone conclusions tumble about our ears, our preconceived opinions are thwarted—strangled. Nothing is the same, there is confusion, chaos, the old order changes; then the turmoil subsides—there is quiet, a cessation of strife; but to us the calmness is ominous—what has been may be again!

It was in this way that I thought of Mrs. Lyndhurst the next morning on waking; my girlish faith had sustained a shock. Jem would have scoffed at the idea of a few wild words altering my estimation of a person, but I could not take them lightly; to me they were pregnant with mysterious meaning—they hinted at something chaotic, terrible. If only I could have talked it over comfortably with Jem; if he could have reasoned my doubts away—but no, there was his sense of honour warning me off forbidden

ground. On certain points Jem was inexorable. I knew him too well ever to hope that his reserve would yield to curiosity; it was no affair of his or mine; we had been innocent eavesdroppers, that was all. Jem would have cried shame on me for letting my truant imaginations play about a neighbour's secret. 'Have you no sense of honour?' he would have said, with crushing sternness, if I had weakly applied to him for a solution. There was no comfort to be got out of Jem in these sort of emergencies. If only I could follow his creditable example, and wipe out the memory of those words; but to me it was impossible. All the world knew that Mrs. Lyndhurst was an unsatisfied, unhappy woman, but that she had sinned—no, impossible. It was that word 'sin' that haunted me, and the despairing tone in which it had been uttered.

I felt I could not go up to the Hall; my looks would have betrayed my inward uneasiness. I was a bad actor; Jem always told me so. I should have felt like a culprit before Mrs. Lyndhurst, and should have stammered over the simplest sentence; and in spite of her gentleness Mrs. Lyndhurst was very clear-eyed and observant. She was by no means indifferent to people's good opinion; she liked to stand well with her friends; any want of respect or consideration would have hurt her grievously.

'I suppose I had better not go to the Hall this afternoon,' I said rather tentatively to Jem, when I encountered him in the garden; but Jem refused to see the feeble bait I flung out to him.

'I suppose not, as Hubert and Kitty are going,' he replied dryly; 'there is no need for the whole family to show up, is there?' and he went off without another word, the tiresome boy. Of course, he saw from my face that I was dying to talk to him, but I might as well have attracted a whale with a gaudy fly! such is masculine human nature and the manners of brothers, that I believe Jem thoroughly enjoyed disappointing me.

But my morbid curiosity was not to be repressed, and on Kitty's return I followed her upstairs on some pretence or other. Kitty was not averse to my company, and she chatted comfortably about her visit, as she smoothed out the fingers of her gloves, so skilfully that they looked like new. It was a sort of education to watch Kitty at her toilet; she had wonderfully methodical little ways. She had lost her parents when she was a child, and had been brought up by her grandmother; all Kitty's prim habits had been inculcated by her aged relative. Kitty's room, her drawers, were models of tidiness; she often volunteered to turn out my drawers and boxes, and reduce their chaotic contents to the same state of elaborate neatness—her lectures to me on this point were highly edifying and amusing.

'Well, it is a shame for girls to be untidy,' Jem once said when I retailed part of Kitty's lecture, giving it a humorous meaning. 'Kitty is quite right, and you ought to turn over a new leaf. A pretty sort of wife you will make, Olga! I quite pity the poor fellow who ever aspires to be my brother-in-law,' which was rude of Jem, and a cowardly going over to the enemy.

'Did you see the ladies, Kitty?' for, in common with the whole of the village, we always called them 'the ladies.'

'Yes; and Miss Sefton insisted on our remaining to tea. They were nicer than usual, very kind and friendly, only Mrs. Lyndhurst looked dreadfully ill. I never saw her face so pinched and white. Hubert noticed it; he spoke to me directly we left the Hall. "How wretched Mrs. Lyndhurst looks!" that was what he said.'

'You and Hubert generally think alike, do you not?' But there was no sarcastic meaning in my question.

Kitty took it seriously, as usual.

'When I first married I thought husbands and wives were bound to think alike,' she said quietly, as she tried to smooth her dark, curly hair. Kitty's hair would ripple into soft little curls and waves above her forehead, though she vainly tried to repress them; but she might as well have tried to straighten Girlie's curly crop. 'I was so young, you know, Olga, and so dreadfully inexperienced. Why, I was only twenty when dear little Cecil died,' for Kitty had lost her first baby, and it had been a great sorrow to her. 'I remember how hard I tried to agree with everything Hubert said; but it was no use, one must have one's own opinions, so I gave it up.'

'I am glad you were so sensible.'

'I did not become so for a long time,' with a faint sigh; 'girls are dreadfully silly. Hubert cured me at last, but I am not going to tell you how; you will find it out for yourself some day, when you are married. I think I like disagreeing with Hubert now and then, because he takes so much trouble to bring me round to his opinion, and there is the pleasure of giving in at the end.'

'And it would be too matter-of-fact to think alike on every point?'

'Of course'—with a knowing nod—'too humdrum altogether; I am afraid'—penitently—'I often give Hubert a great deal of trouble with my little tempers; but he is so dear and patient that it makes me love him all the better.'

I pondered over this wifely speech, which Kitty made with a good deal of feeling; then I shook my head.

'If I had a husband,' I remarked, 'I should wish to be perfect in his eyes. I should not allow him to see my faults more than I could help.'

'That sounds rather fatiguing, Olga, as though one were to be in permanent full-dress. One could not keep that up, you know; there would be a break-down soon.'

'Do you think so?' doubtfully.

'I am sure of it. Why, my dear, two people cannot live together without a good deal of friction, without rubbing against each other's angles. Men are so dreadfully tiresome, you see; they are obtuse, and do not notice little things, and that aggravates a woman. They want you to think them perfect; and if you point out a defect, well, they are as hurt as possible, and yet they will lecture you for half an hour at a time, and tell you not to do this and how to do that; and they expect you to listen with a smile on your face, and if you turn the least bit cross they are off in a moment, and think you unreasonable and ill-tempered.'

'I am sure Hubert is not one of those men.'

'How do you know?' turning on me quite sharply; 'he has his little faults like other people; he can be dense, too, and misunderstand one. Not that I have not often given him things to bear,' with another sigh, 'and of course it was oftener my fault than his. I know that as well as you do, Olga; for I quite understand what your hint implies, and what you and Jem think—that I have never been good enough for Hubert.'

Oh, good gracious! I was in for it now; but fortunately Kitty only grazed the dangerous points and went off at a tangent.

'I daresay you are both of you right, and I am an uncomfortable sort of person to live with; but I cannot help my nature, and Hubert seems happy enough. Well, we won't talk about that any more, though I do wish I were different, for all your sakes.'

'My dear Kitty, I don't believe Hubert wants you to be different; he is far too fond of you.'

She broke into a little smile at this.

'Hubert is my husband, so of course he is good to me; but, Olga,' looking at me wistfully, 'I wish you and Jem understood me better. You don't know,' her voice trembling, 'how hard it is never to feel well, or as strong as other people. It makes me fanciful. I remember when I never ailed anything—when life was just beautiful to me. I never thought then that I should ever come to feel as I do now.'

'Are you feeling worse than usual, Kitty?' I asked, somewhat troubled at this.

'No; I am neither better nor worse. It is the same every day. Dr. Langham says it is want of vitality. I suppose he is right. I try not to trouble Hubert more than I can help. I do not like him to know how tired and good-for-nothing I am; he has enough on his mind without that.'

'I ought to help you more,' I began, feeling rather conscience-stricken; but Kitty would not allow me to go on.

'You do help me, Olga, and I would not willingly monopolise your time. This is your season of pleasure,' looking at me kindly; 'I have had my time. Yes, indeed, I have much to be thankful for. Hubert is good to me, and I have the children. Perhaps if I were stronger I should enjoy my life more, but we are not sent into the world for our own enjoyment,' finished Kitty, with vivid recollection of last Sunday's sermon.

We had wandered far away from Mrs. Lyndhurst, and I dared not return to the subject, especially as Kitty seemed disposed to moralise; but all at once she changed the subject somewhat abruptly.

'We have settled about your trip, Olga. Miss Sefton wants you to get your things ready at once. I suppose you will require a new dress; your summer tweed is rather shabby.'

'I am not sure that I shall buy anything,' rather dubiously. 'I have spent my quarter's allowance already.'

'What a pity!' Kitty had quite recovered herself now. 'If only my things would fit you! Hubert made me get that gray gown and jacket, and I have not worn them more than three times; but you are too tall,' regarding me ruefully, for Kitty was one of the most generous of beings, and would have stripped herself of her pretty things willingly. 'So it is no good thinking about that; you must just ask Hubert for a cheque; tell him from me, if you like, that you must have a new tweed dress and jacket and a hat to match. Miss Sefton must not be disgraced by your shabbiness. He is in his study now. Why don't you go to him and get it over, and then we can buy the dress to-morrow?'

This was sensible advice, and after a minute's hesitation I resolved to follow it. Perhaps Kitty saw the reluctance with which I made up my mind, for she patted me on the shoulder kindly and said:

'You need not be afraid; Hubert is sure to give you what you want; he is always generous.'

Perhaps it was my pride; but I did so hate to ask for money. So I marched into the study in rather a shamefaced way. To add to my embarrassment, Hubert was making up parish

accounts, and looked up with rather an annoyed air at the interruption.

'What do you want, my dear? This is Friday evening, and I am extremely busy—will not the business keep until another time?'

'Oh yes, of course, Hubert, only Kitty wanted me to come. It is about money; but I can wait very well until to-morrow.'

'No, no; perhaps you had better tell me now,' he returned fussily; 'but Kitty might have remembered; it is rather inconsiderate to interrupt me just now,' and then he leant back in his chair and took off his spectacles and regarded me in a reproachful way as I stammered out my request. He was still shaking his head over Kitty's want of consideration as he wrote out the cheque and handed it to me. 'Another time please do not choose Friday evening,' he said with mild insistence.

I had gained my point; but, in spite of his rebuke, I lingered a moment to ask after Hugh, who had been missing all the afternoon.

'Do you know where he is, Hubert?' I ventured.

Hubert's fussiness vanished, and he put on at once his stern schoolmaster's air at the mention of Hugh's name.

'He is in his own room. I sent him there a couple of hours ago. He had to do his sums over again. His work has been disgraceful this week—absolutely disgraceful! I am beginning to think he needs competition. We seem at a dead-lock at present. He must go to school. Vivian thinks so too; only Kitty is so against it; but it has come to this—that I cannot teach him any longer.'

Hubert was walking about the room as he spoke. In mentioning Hugh's name I was touching on a very sore point. His boy's slow perception was a bitter humiliation to him. His parental pride suffered a martyrdom. I felt for him; but, all the same, he was too hard on Hugh.

'Oh, Hubert,' I exclaimed, 'do try him a little longer. You have no idea how hard he really works; only lessons are not so easy to him as to other boys. I think it will break his heart to send him to school.'

'He is breaking mine with his stupidity!' returned Hubert, so bitterly that I stood aghast to hear him. Hubert rarely spoke strongly about anything. 'I can do nothing with him. I talked to him yesterday for nearly half an hour about his bad preparation, and he promised to do better; and this morning his lessons were worse than ever, and his only excuse was, one of his rabbits had died and put everything out of his head.'

I half smiled. Hugh was very babyish for his age, but I knew he was devoted to his pets ; but Hubert's sternness did not relax.

'He is my greatest trial. It is hard to be punished in one's children. I thought I should have been so proud of Hugh—he was such a bright little fellow once ; but he must go to school—I have made up my mind on that point. Where is Kitty? I want to talk to her. These accounts must keep——' and Hubert stalked off, grim and melancholy, to find his wife. How I wished I had not mentioned Hugh ! Now he would make Kitty miserable for the rest of the evening.

I hesitated for a long time before I ventured to go in search of the culprit. When Hubert was in one of these moods it was dangerous to go against him ; even Kitty did not dare to oppose him. Slow-natured men like Hubert let their wrath smoulder unperceived for a long time ; but when they are once at white heat, they are not easily mollified. His very love added fuel to his anger. Hugh's punishment was likely to be commensurate with his father's disappointment. After a time I took courage and crept up to Hugh's room. I could hear the click of spoons and cups in the schoolroom as I passed—the children were having tea. I wondered if nurse had remembered Hugh. The room felt hot and close as I entered it, and Hugh was stooping over his books in the hottest corner. He looked up at me piteously as I entered, and then put down his head on the table and sobbed.

'Oh, Aunt Olga, I cannot do my sums ! My head is so hot, and all the figures dance about so. I have been trying for hours, and they will not come right, and father says—— Oh dear ! oh dear ! what shall I do ?' and the poor little fellow cried as though his heart would break.

'Have you had your tea, Hugh ?'

'No—o ; father said I was to stop here until I had finished my sums.'

I glanced at the hopeless array of figures and at the dog's-eared book, and then spoke with decision :

'Don't cry any more, Hugh ; it is babyish. Boys ought not to cry. Go and wash your face ; sponge it well, and brush your hair ; and I will bring you some tea. Why don't you open your window wide ? there, the room will be fresher so. Now do as I tell you, and I will be back directly ;' and I nodded cheerfully and vanished. Hugh was a great favourite with nurse, so she willingly supplied me with all I wanted, and even cut an extra large slice of cake.

Hugh had finished his ablutions when I returned ; but he could

not call up a smile even at the sight of the cake. Still, he was very glad of the refreshing cup of tea, and I coaxed him to eat by telling him an amusing story of adventure that I had just read. It was deliciously horrible—just what boys love, and the anxious puckers in his face relaxed involuntarily as he listened.

‘What a wonderful man he must have been, Aunt Olga! I should like to be a traveller when I grow up. Father says I shall never make a clergyman, because I can’t do my Latin, and this morning he said I should not even do for a business man,’ and here his chest heaved ominously. ‘I know I did my lesson badly; but I had to bury poor little Cuddy—you know Cuddy, the white rabbit you liked so? He was such a pretty little fellow. Something poisoned him, and I found him dead this morning, and Mr. Vivian made a coffin for him, and we had a funeral, and the old gray rabbit had a crape bow, and——’ but I sternly checked these reminiscences.

‘We will talk by and by, Hugh; but it is getting late, and I want to help you with those sums—at least, I will explain the principle, and you must work them out yourself.’

Hugh nodded, and sat staring at me with his beautiful eyes, trying with all his might to understand my instruction; but it was hard work. I could comprehend Hubert’s fit of disgust and impatience. Hugh was dreadfully slow. We succeeded at last, but not before Hugh complained that his headache had returned; so I persuaded him to go to bed.

‘I will put the books in your father’s study,’ I said; ‘but there is no need for you to come downstairs. You have worried yourself into a fever. You see, the sums were not so difficult after all.’

‘You made it all so easy. You explain things so nicely, auntie. Oh, if I were only as clever as you and mother! I wonder what makes me so stupid? Do you think I was born so? It is not really naughtiness, as father thinks; it is not, really, Aunt Olga.’

I told him that I was sure of that, and he looked a little happier at this assurance, and just at this minute Kitty interrupted us. She was dressed for dinner; but I could see from her eyes that she had been crying.

‘Hugh has done his sums,’ I observed hastily; ‘but his head aches, and I persuaded him to go to bed.’

‘My head does really ache, mother,’ added Hugh anxiously.

Kitty went up to him without a word and felt his forehead and hands; then she glanced at the empty tray; finally she sat down by his bed.

Hugh, who adored his mother, threw his arms round her.

‘Are you going to stop with me a little?’ he said joyfully.

'Aunt Olga has been so kind. She showed me how to do my sums. I did try so hard, mother, only father will not believe it.'

'Are you sure you tried, Hugh?' And then she continued sadly, 'You are making your father and me very unhappy. I don't think father has ever been so angry with you before. He says he cannot teach you any longer—that you must go to school.'

The boy's arms fell away from her neck in a moment. He seemed to shrink into himself at this announcement.

'Oh, mother!' was all he said; but his tone touched Kitty's motherly heart. She was very tender with her children.

'Father has tried his very best,' she said softly; 'but he feels it is all no use—that a stranger will teach you better. He has been talking to me about it, and I can see he means what he says!'

'Shall you let me go, mother?' in a reproachful voice.

'I must let you go,' she replied quietly; 'you are father's boy as well as mine, and he knows what is best for you. I don't want to part with you, my darling,' as the boy lay shaking with sobs, and she stooped over and kissed him very lovingly; 'but I must help father to do his duty. He is not sending you away because he does not love you; but because he knows it will be best for you to learn with other boys.'

The gong sounded at this moment, and I was obliged to go; but I left Hugh more comfortably. I knew Kitty would not leave him until she had drawn the sting from his pain. Her maternal instinct was very strong. She was always at her best with her children.

When I had finished dressing I stole to the half-opened door and peeped in. Kitty was on her knees beside the bed. She seemed speaking very solemnly, though I could not hear the words. When she had finished, Hugh said:

'Mother dear, won't you say another prayer, asking that I may be a clever boy? I often do.'

'I don't think those sort of prayers help us, dear,' she returned gently. 'Perhaps it is God's will that you are not as quick as other boys of your age. It may be your trial; we all have our trials, Hugh. Only try to believe that father loves you as much as he does Wilfred and the twins, and that we are only sending you away for your own good; and ask God to make you brave, and more willing to go—that is a much better prayer.'

'Very well, mother. Now you must go down to dinner; I must not keep you any longer.'

'Good-night, then, my dearest boy!'

What put it into Kitty's mind to say that? Was he, after all, her dearest, although at times she had seemed hard to him? I

could fancy the happy smile on Hugh's face. The boy doted on his parents. If he could only bring himself to believe that he was as dear to them as their clever, sprightly Wilfred, he would be a far happier boy.

I drew back from the door as Kitty came out ; but I could not help kissing her for being so nice to Hugh. There was a wonderfully gentle expression on her face as she smiled back at me ; but she did not speak, neither did I.

CHAPTER VI

'THE LADY'S WALK'

'Tis life whereof our nerves are scant ;
More life and fuller that we want.
No heart in which was healthful breath
Has ever truly longed for death.'

WORDSWORTH.

HUGH's childish griefs had banished the tragical recollections of last night from my memory, but they revived with added intensity when, later in the evening, a note arrived from the Hall. Aunt Catherine was going to London on business the next morning, and would be away the whole day. Mrs. Lyndhurst was more unwell than usual, and—here the words were underlined—would I take my work and spend the afternoon with her, and so shorten the hours of her loneliness?

There could be only one response to this. I was accustomed to these friendly demands; it was quite a usual thing for me to sit with Mrs. Lyndhurst during her sister's brief absences in town; nevertheless, for the first time I was unwilling to obey the summons. When I passed the note to Jem I looked at him meaningly and shrugged my shoulders, but his sole answer was a blank stare. This vexed me, and I said with some degree of pettishness:

'These visits to town are endless just now; it is rather a bore leaving home so much during your last week—don't you think so?'

'If Aunt Catherine wants you, I don't think we ought to consider ourselves,' he replied in the most indifferent voice. That was the worst of Jem—he never would encourage what he called sentimentality; with all his affection for me—and I believe he felt far more than he expressed—he always damped anything like effusion; lingering leavetakings, terms of endearment, or unnecessary caresses were abhorrent to his somewhat stoical nature.

This little appeal that vaguely implied a necessity for his presence did not touch him in the least, and when I begged him rather urgently to keep himself free for the following afternoon, that we might have a nice long walk together, he returned dryly that Vivian had already booked him for a bicycle trip.

This was too much for my philosophy.

'Oh, Jem, and we shall only have two whole days together after that!'

Jem put down his carving tools—he was making a bracket for Kitty—and looked at me with profound anxiety.

'Do you feel ill, Olga? This is the first I have heard about it, but'—with a glance at the timepiece—'it is not so very late, scarcely half-past nine, so I can easily go down for Dr. Langham.'

'What do you mean?' I returned, utterly bewildered.

Had Jem taken leave of his senses? he was actually holding my hand and fumbling at my pulse; but I wrenched it from him quite crossly.

'I thought you were going to die or do something equally disagreeable, as we had only two whole days before us; it made me feel quite bad for a moment;' and the tiresome boy sighed heavily, and took up his tools again. And then what did he do but paraphrase Mrs. Hemans's exquisite little lament: 'Oh, call my sister back to me! I cannot play alone;' but I would not listen to him.

I am afraid I was decidedly cross with Jem that night—as though he cared! I heard him laughing as I left the room. I would not say good-night to him. Yes, I made up my mind that that would be a fitting punishment for his hard-heartedness and want of feeling. I knew the resolution would cost me a good cry, for I was so fond of Jem that I could not bear to be angry with him for a moment, and I very seldom was; but his manner was decidedly trying this evening; and he must be taught that a sister had feelings. As I was still in the same humour half an hour afterwards, I went up to my room, taking no notice of Jem, who was still busy with his bracket; but a short time afterwards there was a great flap against my door. It was a sound I knew well, most likely Rollo wanted some water; but when I opened it there was Rollo wagging his huge tail with an air of immense satisfaction, and holding a brown-paper parcel in his mouth, which he dropped at once at my feet. I eyed it gingerly. Could Harry have dared? I was quite afraid to touch it; it was so unpleasant giving back presents, and yet if I kept it—but I was too sensible to think of doing such a thing. I hesitated so long that

Rollo whined and scratched at the parcel with his clumsy paw, as much as to say, 'Why don't you open it?' So, to keep him quiet, I untied the string.

But to my delight it was not from Harry at all; it was actually from Jem. Oh, the dear fellow! it was his own handiwork, a pretty little carved box with a lock and key, that he had made to surprise me, most likely—his parting gift! It was quite empty. No, there was a folded paper inside. I opened it eagerly—a copy of verses! Oh, Jem, how delicious!

'Oh! call my brother back to me,
But do not call too loud.
Poor chap! alas, I warrant thee
He lies within his shroud!'

and so on.

At this moment I heard a low whistle. Rollo heard it, too, for he pricked up his glossy ears and vanished. I followed and peeped over the banisters. Jem was coming lazily upstairs with his candle, but he suddenly thought better of it, and deliberately sat down on the staircase, while Rollo squatted on his haunches beside him. In this position the most remarkable colloquy ensued.

'I say, Rollo, old fellow, what's up with Olga? Tell us, there's a good chappie.'

'Don't be vulgar, Jem,' in a hoarse voice; "'chappie's" low, dear boy.'

'Oh, shut up! none of that.'

'Well,' still more hoarsely, 'mind your manners then; but I am sorry to tell you the missis is horribly cross.'

'No, you don't say so?'

'In a regular passion. "Rollo," says she, "where's that rude, unfeeling boy, Jem?" says she. "Talk of brothers, he's a regular bad one," says she, "and I should like to box his ears; but as I shall only have a brother for two whole days——" and here she fetches out her handkerchief and cries awful.'

'Awfully, Rollo, awfully!' but here I came upon Jem like a whirlwind; and if, as he said afterwards, he had not had the presence of mind to blow out the candle, nobody would have known what might or might not have happened, for he was in imminent danger of strangulation.

But in spite of his struggles and Rollo's wild barks of joy I managed to thank him my own way.

He was quite limp and melancholy when I got him into my room at last, and looked at Rollo in a very feeling manner.

'What a pity our nice little tête-à-tête was interrupted,' he

observed sadly ; 'my peculiar nature needs sympathy and plenty of it—"what I takes I takes strong," as the charwoman observed when the cabman pressed her to take a glass of something 'ot—that's the way the lower orders talk ; "but, old chappie," says she——'

'Now, Jem, I will not have it—not a word more ; it is no use your pretending to be vulgar—of course I understand what your ridiculous remarks meant.'

'Indeed !' and Jem looked at me stolidly—such an absence of expression I never saw in any human face.

'Yes, you wanted me to understand that these little matters of detail do not matter a bit ; that I have got you, and you have got me——'

'Observe how exquisitely worded,' groaned the incorrigible Jem ; 'go ahead, Olga—you have got me and I have got you ; all right, what comes next ?'

'This ;' and then I did actually box Jem's ears, and he called out and Rollo barked furiously, and Hubert's voice was heard in the distance asking what on earth was the matter—were we going to wake the children ? And then Jem gave me a hasty kiss and fled. How I laughed when Rollo and I were left alone ! Jem could be ridiculous when he liked, but all the same he meant to teach me a little lesson.

This absurd scene had refreshed me, and I set off for the Hall the next day in much better spirits. I found Mrs. Lyndhurst in her private sitting-room, a small room on the first floor, with a window overlooking the elm avenue. It was not so handsomely furnished as the library, which was Aunt Catherine's special sanctum, but it was a pleasant room nevertheless ; the furniture was old-fashioned, the walls were covered with family portraits, and there was an air of cosiness about it. Mrs. Lyndhurst was lying back in a low cushioned chair that she used as a lounge. As I entered she held out her hand to me with a beseeching look ; it was a look that seemed to say a good deal—to claim, in a dumb sort of way, a large portion of forbearance and sympathy. I never knew eyes to express so much ; to-day they reminded me of some animal in pain ; for the first time I felt confused as I met them.

'You are very good to come so early, Olga,' she said, without noticing my embarrassment ; 'will you take off your hat ? I see you have brought your work ; that is nice. I have not been feeling myself for some days, so Catherine thought your company would be soothing. You see I am so used to you,' with an affectionate smile ; 'the society of some young people would make me restless, but I never feel so with you.'

This little compliment touched me.

'I always like coming here,' I returned graciously. 'Jem walked with me to the door; he sent his love to you; he was so sorry that you were not well enough to see him. Bennett told us so.'

I thought Mrs. Lyndhurst looked disturbed; her face clouded.

'Quite right; Bennett knew that I was not fit to talk to young men. Jem is a nice boy—a very nice boy; Catherine is exceedingly fond of him. But no, I could not see him; it would have troubled me—it—'

She passed her hand over her forehead as though she were tired or harassed; a sort of feebleness came into her face. I do not know how to describe the expression, but it always distressed me when she looked like that, so I hastened to set her mind at ease.

'Jem quite understands—he never minds being sent away. Perhaps you may be well enough in a day or two to bid him good-bye—he is going away on Tuesday; oh, I am so sorry! Fircroft is never the same without Jem; he is so full of life, so energetic, he puts spirit into one's daily existence—oh, I do not know how to express it, but he seems to pervade the whole house.'

'The other young men will be still there, will they not?' she said, smiling a little at my enthusiasm.

'Yes, but they are just young men; nobody wants them. They are often in the way; young men are so stupid. Perhaps Mr. Vivian is an exception. He is really nice; not at all insipid or slow, like the others; but he is not Jem.'

'Jem will not always be the first, Olga.'

'Yes, indeed he will,' rather vehemently, for though of course I knew what Mrs. Lyndhurst meant—and why will middle-aged people always hint at these sort of things?—I felt confident in my own mind that no one but Harry would ever think me attractive, or want to make love to me, and I should certainly never listen to him. Harry would never be anything but a nice boy to me.

'Well, well, we shall see. Now, Olga, do you feel inclined to read to me? The box has come down from Mudie's, and there are some nice new books. You can choose any you like.'

This was an unexpected treat. Mrs. Lyndhurst did not often ask me to read to her; but she seemed too fatigued to talk much, so I made my selection and read aloud with the greatest enjoyment to myself, and, I hope, to her, until Mrs. Lyndhurst's maid brought up the tea. Marsden was a kind-hearted creature, and

devoted to her mistress, and she always seemed pleased to see me. She smiled as she placed the low table beside me and arranged the cups and saucers.

'I am glad you are able to come, ma'am,' she said pleasantly, 'for my mistress seems a little low to-day.'

'That is no new thing, Marsden,' returned Mrs. Lyndhurst, who had overheard this.

'It is none the better for being old, is it, ma'am? and I am sure Miss Olga's company is always good for you. Young folk have cheerful ways with them. Will you ring for anything you want, ma'am?'

And Marsden, with another benevolent look at us both, withdrew.

Making tea at the Hall was one of my minor luxuries; it was a pleasure to me to handle the beautiful Worcester cups, while the mere sight of the little melon-shaped silver teapot, with its rich chasing, and the quaint dumpy cream-jug, gave me a feeling of satisfaction. I was, like other girls, very partial to pretty things. It was so peaceful at the Hall this afternoon; only the hoarse cawing of the rooks broke the stillness. The avenue looked as quiet as though it were a glade in an enchanted forest; patches of sunlight were chequered by faint purple shadows, while a zigzag of golden mist, shot through with radiant colour, seemed to stretch between the tree-boles like a fairy ladder, all vaporous brightness. We talked for a little while, and then I took up the book again; and so the time passed, until Marsden came to warn her mistress that it was time to dress for dinner. I rose to take my leave, but, to my surprise, Mrs. Lyndhurst refused to part with me. I had done her good, she said, and, as Catherine would be late, I might stay and keep her company. My white dress was quite nice enough for anything, and Bennett should send a message to Fircroft; and, as Marsden looked at me rather wistfully, as though she would beg me not to refuse her mistress, I consented to remain.

So it was settled, and Mrs. Lyndhurst and I dined in state in the big dining-room, waited upon by Bennett, the white-haired butler, and his subordinate, Reynolds. Mrs. Lyndhurst hardly spoke, and ate very little, and the silence was only broken by the servants' quiet movements about the room. Now and then I looked up, and saw the whole scene reproduced in a long mirror that hung opposite to me. The sad, pathetic-looking woman, in her black draperies, sitting silently at the head of the table, and facing her a slim girl in a white gown, with smooth brown hair, and large questioning eyes that seemed to appeal against the dulness. I

think Bennett felt for me, for he handed me everything himself without waiting for Reynolds; and there was something persuasive in his tone as he named the various dainties, as though he feared a refusal. Bennett and I were on excellent terms. At the Hall I was generally Miss Olga to the servants, never Miss Leigh.

Mrs. Lyndhurst proposed a turn in the garden after dinner, and to this I willingly assented. The long sitting had cramped my young limbs. I felt restless, as though I wanted to run, to laugh, to do anything, in fact, but accommodate my steps to Mrs. Lyndhurst's languid pace; but she took my arm, and leant rather heavily on it, as though she were weary. As usual, she led the way to the Lady's Walk, and I dared not remonstrate. The sun was setting, but under the thick shade of trees it was already twilight, and the old eerie feeling crept over me.

Mrs. Lyndhurst did not seem to notice my uneasiness. The soft evening air refreshed her, and she began talking in her ordinary way:

'You have done me good, Olga. I am glad Catherine proposed sending for you; but it has been a long dull day for you, my dear.'

'Not at all,' I interposed hastily.

'It is kind of you to say so; but I am not an amusing person. Catherine is used to me, and so she puts up with all my odd ways. After all, there is nothing like a sister. Catherine has been far too good to me all her life. I am a great trouble to her, but she never will own it.'

I knew the sisters were devoted to each other; but they were not demonstrative, and seldom spoke of their feelings. I was glad to hear Mrs. Lyndhurst express herself after this grateful fashion, for I knew she often gave Aunt Catherine a great deal to bear.

'You will miss her very much when she goes to St. Croix.'

'Yes; but I must not think of that,' she returned quickly. 'One must not consider one's self in the matter. There is business to be done—important business—and no one can do it but Catherine—she is so strong, so clear-headed. She is so different from me altogether. I am not old, Olga, in spite of my gray hairs, and yet the time has come to me when the grasshopper is a burden. Do you remember how the Wise Man puts it: "And fears shall be in the way"? It seems to me as though I dread my own shadow sometimes.'

'I wish I could help you and Aunt Catherine,' I began wistfully, but I dared not proceed.

Mrs. Lyndhurst gave me a furtive look. She understood without words what I meant.

'That is for Catherine to decide. She has been talking to me

again. She makes me miserable—as though I had not enough to bear without that. I do not like reposing confidence in young people—they are so hard, they judge so severely. It is the old who are merciful, who know how to make excuses.'

'Mrs. Lyndhurst, it is you who are hard now. When you were young you would not have said that.'

'Was I ever young?—it is very long ago then; but you must not quote me as an example, Olga.'

'Why not?' rather curiously.

'Because I was not good—not what a girl ought to be. I was self-willed, and bent on having my own way. Catherine would tell you that she does not condone the past, for all her pity. If I had only listened to her, if I had allowed her to be my conscience, I should not be the lonely, unhappy woman I am now.'

She seemed profoundly agitated, and I dared not question her any more; but my thoughts were very busy over this speech. Why was Mrs. Lyndhurst lonely? she had Aunt Catherine; and, in reality, Aunt Catherine was just as lonely as she, and yet I had never heard Aunt Catherine complain.

It might be that in her secret heart she would have preferred a fuller life; that the love of husband and children would have been as precious to her as to other women; but she never bemoaned her solitary state—on the whole, she seemed busy and happy. Perhaps I was not competent to judge; but it always seemed to me that the position of the ladies at the Hall was singularly enviable. They had wealth, freedom, and consideration; they were beloved by their poorer neighbours, and respected and liked by all who shared their friendship. After all, was it a bad thing to be free as air, to do what one liked, to follow one's bent unchecked and untrammelled by a husband? That obedience was a formidable item in the marriage ceremony—to love would be comparatively easy; but to voluntarily submit to a master was quite another thing. I began to take counsel with myself, if it would not be as well always to remain Olga Leigh.

I was roused from this reverie by a touch on my arm. Mrs. Lyndhurst was looking at me fixedly; her manner was full of suppressed melancholy.

'Do not take example by me, Olga,' she said imploringly; 'if I had my life over again—oh, if we only could!—how differently I would act now! It is terrible to grow old, my dear, when one's youth has been a failure. It is as though some inexorable power were compelling us to sit still and watch the result of our life-work—we cannot turn our eyes away if we would—"Give an account, add up the losses of the years before death comes," that

is what it says; and some of us who are miserable bankrupts fear to turn over a single leaf.'

'Dear Mrs. Lyndhurst, we are none of us without faults.'

'But some are more guilty than others, Olga. You are young, but you are good and true; keep so; dread the first stain of wrong-doing. One wrong act involves another, until we are entangled in our own web. I am talking strangely to-night, dear child; but one of my melancholy fits is on me, and the sense of loss is heavier than usual.' She paused, and I could see her eyes were full of tears. 'It is getting late now, and you must go home. Leave me to take a turn by myself; solitude often soothes me.'

'Must I go, Mrs. Lyndhurst?'

'Yes, my child, I think it better; but to-morrow you may come to us again.'

She kissed my cheek with her cold lips and turned away. I was left by myself, and the uncanny feeling returned—Lady Gwendoline might be near me. I sped away through the garden-paths as though my feet were winged; only once I looked back. The moon had just risen, its faint, silvery light illumined the dark walk. Mrs. Lyndhurst was pacing up and down it slowly. I could see her tall, graceful figure distinctly; she had drawn her lace scarf over her gray hair, and she looked weird and strange in the dim light. Suddenly she stopped and flung up her arms. I could see her thin white hands clasping each other. 'Will it be too late?'—did I hear the words or only dream them?—'Too late for me? too late for him?'

CHAPTER VII

UNLOCKING PANDORA'S BOX

'Heigh ho ! daisies and buttercups,
Fair yellow daffodils, stately and tall ;
A sunshiny world full of laughter and leisure,
And fresh hearts unconscious of sorrow and thrall !
Send down on their pleasure smiles passing its measure,
God that is over us all !'

JEAN INGELOW.

SOON after this I had to bid good-bye to Jem. It was always a trying ordeal, and no amount of usage could reconcile me to the parting. The floods of tears that that boy cost me ! Not that I would have let him know how I cried my eyes out directly he was out of sight ! Jem's behaviour during the last few days had not been wholly satisfactory. To tell the truth, I found his light-hearted philosophy very trying under the circumstances ; his cheerfulness was almost aggressive. He took no notice of my lugubrious looks, and while I was counting up the hours and minutes like a miser, and begrudging every duty that called me away, Jem lounged away his time in the young men's study, talking nonsense with Harry Vivian, or boxing or fencing with Mr. Campbell. The bicycle trip had come off, and Jem had been late for dinner that day, and though he had invited me for a walk the following afternoon, I found to my chagrin that Harry was to be of the party. I could not help giving Jem a reproachful look as Harry went on to open the gate for Rollo, who was wild to get out.

'What's the matter now ?' he asked innocently.

'Why did you ask Harry ?' I whispered crossly, for really Jem was incorrigible ; 'you might have remembered that I should want you to myself for our last walk.'

But my remark did not make the least impression on him ;

he only whistled, and then began to laugh as though he were amused.

'That's the way you mean to talk to your young man, I suppose, if you ever get one?' observed the rude boy. 'You will have to mind what you are about, Olga. Not many fellows would be so good-natured as I am. Here are Vivian and I putting ourselves out for your pleasure, and this is the way you treat us. Vivian, I hope your young woman will behave herself better than Olga does; she is always grumbling at me for something or other. Why don't you do this or do that? I have to put my foot down pretty strongly, I can tell you; it is the only way when one has to deal with girls,' finished Jem in a disgusted manner.

And then to punish me for objecting to that tiresome Harry's company, he talked to him exclusively for the next mile or two; but he was very nice the remainder of the way, as though to make up for it.

It was always an understood thing that I should help Jem pack, so on the last morning I went up to his room. I thought Jem was in better spirits than usual; he rattled on volubly: no other word would rightly express his bright and inconsequent talk, or the rapidity with which he hurried from one topic to another.

'Catch hold of these shirts,' and a pile of linen descended on my lap; 'ram them in hard, Olga. I don't believe women know how to pack; it wants a mathematical brain to calculate distance and economise space. There are my new socks,' a flutter of gaudily-striped things aimed from the other end of the room, and caught with difficulty; 'now set to work, old girl, while I fold my coats,' and Jem whistled an air from *Les Huguenots*. If one or two tears dropped on the new shirts no one was the wiser. Of course it was only Jem's way, and it was natural that he should be a little elated at the idea of his tutorship; it was such a beautiful house where he was going, and he would have plenty of fishing, and shooting, and tennis, and a host of pleasant new acquaintances, and what could a young man ask more? and of course he could not take me with him, so I was a goose to fret; but, still, if he would only talk to me, or let me talk to him, and not go on quoting French in that ridiculous fashion.

Jem ate an excellent lunch; he was joking with Harry all the time. Harry was going with him to the station—he did not address me at all until the last moment. I had run up to his room to see that nothing was left behind, when I heard him spring up after me three steps at a time.

'Good-bye, old girl!' he said, catching hold of me; 'take care of yourself, and don't get into mischief without me.'

'Oh, Jem, don't go yet,' I implored; 'I want to speak to you.'

'I can't stop, the cab's waiting;' and he would not let me detain him one moment. I followed him to the door, and he waved his hand to me with a cheery smile. Not even saying good-bye to me for five whole months—for I should not see him before he went back to Oxford—could make Jem look grave, even for an instant. I shut myself up in his empty room, and had what women call a good cry, and it really did me good.

When I went into the drawing-room, two hours later, feeling very sad and subdued, I found Harry there alone. He was evidently waiting for me, and I was quite sure, from his voice, that he was very sorry for me.

'It always seems strange without Jem, doesn't it?' were his first words. 'I am sure he felt going away very much this time; he was terribly glum as we drove to the station—that is not like Jem at all.'

Jem glum! I could not believe my ears.

'He did not talk a bit, and seemed quite down, poor old fellow. He does not like leaving you, Miss Leigh, that's what it is; and of course it is natural—for if you were my sister——'

And here Harry heaved a tremendous sigh, which aggravated me in my tender state, and made me rather short with him.

'But I am Jem's sister, you see.'

'Yes,' and here Harry sighed again; 'but if there is anything I can do for you in Jem's absence—any little service, I mean—I am sure I would gladly do it; it would be no end of pleasure,' continued the poor boy rather sadly; 'for though I know I am nothing to you beside Jem—and where would any one find a nicer fellow?—still, I do think a lot of you, as you know, and it would be just a happiness to me to find out anything I could do for you.'

After all, sympathy is very soothing, especially when one is very low, so I could not help looking kindly at Harry, and thanking him; and I suppose my manner was softer than usual, for the foolish fellow turned quite red with pleasure.

'You could not think of anything just now, could you, Miss Olga?'

'No, not this minute; but I will pour you out a cup of tea, as Kitty is keeping us waiting.' I did not like that 'Miss Olga,' it was too familiar; and I did not quite like the expressive look that accompanied it. Really, young men were very difficult to manage; to think of all the snubs I had given Harry, and yet he presumed to call me 'Miss Olga' in that tone. But I was too low-spirited to resent it actively, and so Harry had the best of it that day.

Jem wrote me a nice little note the next day, to tell me of his safe arrival at Middleton Park.

'I am in clover,' he wrote; 'it is an awfully jolly place—deer park, and such preserves, and the house as big as a barrack. The widow' (Mrs. Middleton had lost her husband the previous year) 'is very civil; but, of course, she is a trifle melancholy, which is to be expected, poor thing! and the boy is a nice fellow, only not very robust. I expect to have a real good time here, and to meet no end of swells. You may write to me as often as you like, and mind you tell me everything about yourself. I always feel responsible for you, and though I don't like finding fault—being a soft-hearted fellow—there is a vein of sentimentality in your character that gives me a good deal of trouble. The worst of an impulsive person is—you never know what they are going to do next. But no more of this, from your affectionate brother—JEM.'

Perhaps people might say there was not much in the note to make me feel so much happier, but I could read a great deal between the lines: Jem wanted to hear from me, he was anxious to continue my confidant; I was to tell him anything and everything; and, best of all, his stoicism had been intended as an antidote to my sentimentality, and was not really want of feeling. And when I had made all this clear to myself, I cheered up immensely.

I was happier, too, about Hugh, after a little conversation we had together.

I was sitting on the lawn one evening, watching an exciting tennis match between Harry and Mr. Campbell, when Hugh ran over the grass and joined me.

'Do you know where mother is, Aunt Olga?'

'Yes, dear; she is in the schoolroom. Mab and Jessie wanted her to hear their new duet; they have been practising it so nicely. I am sure she will be quite pleased to hear them. Where have you been all the afternoon, Hugh?'

For the boy had a bright, excited look. Hugh was not a handsome boy; the twins were decidedly pretty little girls, and Wilfred had his father's well-cut features, but Hugh was somewhat ordinary, and only his soft brown eyes redeemed him from plainness. Still, he was a gentlemanly-looking little fellow, and, after all, a boy does not need beauty.

'I have been with father,' he returned, in answer to my question. 'We have been for such a long walk—to Bletchley and round by Wardley, which was ever so nice.'

'You like a walk with father?' For his voice was quite eager.

'Oh yes! And he talked to me such a lot, Aunt Olga—all about my rabbits, and the chickens, and our new plan for the garden; and he has promised to let Mr. Vivian help us build our new summer-house; and then'—here Hugh's voice dropped a little—'he talked about something else.'

'You mean about the school?'

'Yes; did you know it is all settled, and I am to go to Mr. Fulton's next term? Father says he knows Eastbourne well, and that it is such a nice place, and that I am sure to like it. There are eighty boys, and the house is so big, and they have a field to play in, and three times a week the boys go down to the sea to bathe; and they have cricket-matches, and paper-chases, and all sorts of fun; and he says, too, that Mr. and Mrs. Fulton are such kind people, and that he knows I shall be very happy there.'

'Dear Hugh, I am so glad!'

'But I did not like it at first, you know, not until father talked to me. I used to cry about it every time I went to bed. I did not know what the twins would do without me; and there was mother. But father was ever so nice'—Hugh's favourite expression; 'he told me that he did not like parting with me, but that he knew it would be for my good, and that I should learn better with other boys; and that if I wanted to please him, and make him proud of me, I must be brave, and not mind leaving home, as my fretting made mother unhappy. And so I promised, and he kissed me, and I think there were tears in his eyes. So you see, Aunt Olga'—with a curious blending of grief and triumph in his tone—'father really does love me, though I am so stupid. He said it gave him great pain not to be able to keep me with him; and then he stopped suddenly and began talking about other things, and then we came home.'

I was very glad to hear Hugh's account, but I had no opportunity to say more just then, for Mab came running out of the house, closely followed by Jessie as usual—no one ever saw the twins apart.

'Oh, Hughie!' she exclaimed breathlessly; 'mother is so pleased with our duet!'

'Yes; and we are to play it to father this evening,' added Jessie. 'We are to sit up on purpose. Shall we ask mother to let you sit up too?'

'Hugh must hear us, of course,' observed Mab decidedly. Both of the twins were devoted to Hugh. They each of them took a hand as they spoke. 'Let us go and speak to mother at once. Come, Hughie dear!'

And they carried him off. What a pretty picture they looked

—the little girls in their white smocks, with their fair hair streaming behind them, and Hugh's dark, closely-cropped head between! Once all the three heads seemed to touch each other in their eager talk. Two little arms went round Hugh's neck.

'Oh, Hughie! must you go?' I heard Jessie say in a very sorrowful voice.

Hugh was telling his story over again then. There would be lamentations and tears when Hugh left his little sisters; he was at once their master and their slave, the patient victim of all their little whims, and the grateful recipient of their overflowing affection.

'Of course he must go if father sends him,' remarked Mab, who was more strong-minded than her sister. 'Never mind, Hughie darling, we will write you long letters and tell you about the rabbits and everything, won't we, Jessie?' and then they each kissed him, and the arms went round his neck again, and in this fashion they proceeded solemnly to the house.

Kitty was not the woman to refuse such a request. She was far too fond of spoiling her little daughters. When the twins played their duet that evening, Hugh was in the corner beside the piano. Kitty watched them delightedly:

'Aren't they darlings?' her eyes seemed to ask. Her voice was full of maternal pride when she spoke.

Hubert was far more moderate.

'Very nicely played, my dears,' he said when they had finished. 'Kitty, my love, your pupils do you credit,' and he made a bow to each of them in turn. How the twins laughed! 'We shall have great pleasure in seeing these young ladies in the drawing-room again, eh, Cunningham? Now run away to bed, and, Hugh, open the door for your sisters like a gentleman.'

Hugh obeyed, but Harry and Mr. Campbell were before him, and stood at the door like a pair of sentries.

'Thank you,' said Jessie, lifting up her sweet little face rather shyly to the young men as she passed; but Mab, who saw the humour of the situation, exploded into a little laugh.

'Aren't big people funny sometimes?' I heard her say when they were outside. 'Why did you get so red, Jessie? you always do. I am sure father liked our piece quite as well as mother did.'

During the week that followed I saw very little of Aunt Catherine. True, I had resumed my old habits and went almost daily to the Hall, but I saw most of Mrs. Lyndhurst. Aunt Catherine was always busy and preoccupied, and never pressed me to stay.

'We shall have plenty of time to talk presently,' she said once, dismissing me with a wistful smile.

I had nearly finished my modest preparations by this time. A new travelling-box, the joint gift of Kitty and Hubert, stood in one corner of my room. I used to look at it every night with the pleasurable anticipation with which a pilgrim might eye his staff and scrip. It was a sort of Pandora's box to me, and most surely Hope was at the bottom. O divine gift of all the goddesses, the especial heritage of youth, with what soft rainbow tints dost thou paint the future! what golden rays hover amongst those misty distances—the visionary hilltops that enclose the fabulous kingdom of the Might-be! I verily believe that to my young home-bred enthusiasm St. Croix seemed a sort of enchanted place. In youth the very charm of novelty is an exhaustive pleasure—to wake up in a foreign land, to hear a different language, to see fresh sights, to reap new experiences. What could be more delightful? It is the tedium, the routine, the changelessness of daily life, that weary the young. To inherit only a small bare corner of the globe seems very pitiful to the heir of all the ages.

In looking back on those days I am almost tempted to exclaim with the aged Faust: 'Oh, stay; the moment is so fair!' As though one could arrest that strange, sweet dreaming-time that we call youth!

I was beginning to wonder when marching orders would reach me, and to chafe a little at the delay, when one morning one of Aunt Catherine's brief notes was put into my hand. All her arrangements were made, and she would be glad to see me the following afternoon. Would I come as soon after luncheon as possible—this was all it said. I scribbled off an affirmative answer, and then rushed upstairs in a high state of excitement to try on the new tweed dress and the hat that Kitty had trimmed for me. Then, I am ashamed to say, I sat down on the floor before my box and indulged in a delicious day-dream—in which position I was discovered by my nieces. The little girls seemed mystified, and stood hand-in-hand at the door regarding me in perplexed fashion.

'May we come in, Aunt Olga?' It was Mab who spoke. 'We wanted you to tell us how to dress our new doll.' It was always 'our doll'—our everything. The twins had everything in common. 'You weren't busy, were you?' eyeing my lowly position rather dubiously.

'No, I was only thinking.'

'Do you always think on the floor, auntie?'

'Oh dear no. I do my thinking anywhere!'

'We never think quite so hard, do we, Jessie? We thought you were asleep, Aunt Olga; your head was quite down on the box, and Rollo was sitting up staring at you. It did look so funny, didn't it, Jessie?'

'Very funny,' replied Jessie, who generally repeated her sister's words with parrot-like precision.

Mab had far more originality. Now, I do not know what fit of idle mischief was on me that I should infect those innocent little creatures with my grown-up nonsense; but I made them sit down one on each side of me, while Rollo blinked at us between his paws, and thereupon I told them a wonderful tale of an enchanted kingdom, called Dreamland, wherein all manner of loveliness dwelt, and how there were magic keys forged that would unlock the mysterious portals, and how I was wandering in this strange, fair country when they disturbed me.

I saw Mab knit her brows at this point, as though she were trying to understand, but Jessie exclaimed:

'Why, you were sitting on the floor, auntie, doing nothing at all!'

'Nurse never likes us to do nothing,' put in Mab; 'she always says doing nothing is helping to spin Satan's web. She says so, doesn't she, Jessie?'

This was not a pleasant idea. Could it be possible that these spangles I was weaving were any part of the arch-adversary's work? Nurse's Puritan notions had spoiled everything. My aerial car of fancy dropped from the clouds.

'My dear Mab,' I observed sententiously, 'only clever people can talk nonsense. Little girls like you cannot be expected to understand everything. Now, where is the doll, that I may give my opinion on her toilette?'

And then, as Jessie produced her piccebag, we were soon as busy as bees. Why do we always use that comparison? Spiders are busy, and worms and moles in a dark underground way; but to be busy as a worm somehow suggests a crawling policy, and subterranean deeds unfettered by wholesome daylight. To be busy as beavers would be better and more original. I do love those dear clever architects and builders!

The next day, as ill-luck would have it—Hubert would have preached me a sermon if he had heard me use that most heathenish expression—some old friends whom we had not seen for years bore down upon us from an unexpected quarter, invaded our luncheon-board, and, upon pressing invitation, remained to tea. It was in vain that I pleaded my engagement with Aunt Catherine in an importunate aside to Hubert. I must remain and help Kitty

entertain our guests, that was his reply. They would leave early, and I should still have time to pay my visit to the Hall before dinner.

If there was one point on which Hubert was fussy, it was on the duty of hospitality, and the necessity of putting ourselves out even for those who were personally antagonistic to our tastes. 'The law of kindness is too much set aside in these days,' he remarked in my hearing once, and I am afraid the admonition was intended for my special benefit; for Kitty was always gracious to the most unwelcome visitor. "Thy own friend and thy father's friend forsake not." I am always reminded of that text when I see young people yawning metaphorically in the presence of their elders, and mentally stigmatising them as unmitigated bores. We should try to remember that by and by we shall be old bores, too, and that a younger generation will turn its cold shoulder to us. What a pity, then, to withhold our kindly looks and words where perhaps they are greatly needed. "Do as you would be done by," that is the golden rule, after all.'

Now, as Hubert always tried to practise what he preached in his own gentlemanly way, and Kitty, like a true wife, aided and abetted him, people generally stayed twice as long at Fircroft as they would have done at any other house; luncheon visitors remained to tea, and so on. 'It is difficult to tear one's self away from this delightful house, dear Mrs. Leigh,' had often been the speech of a gratified visitor, and on the present occasion I really thought Colonel Morison and his sister would never go. I sat literally on thorns the latter part of the afternoon. I saw Kitty look at me reproachfully once or twice as though she thought I was not taking my fair share in the conversation. 'Olga knows this,' 'Olga will tell you that,' she kept saying. 'Olga, will you show Miss Morison the photo of Jem in his undergraduate's cap and gown?' and so on.

Well, it was over at last. Hubert had taken up his felt hat to walk with his visitors to the gate, and Kitty had accompanied them to the door. I saw my opportunity for making my escape; in another minute I was crossing the lawn like a lapwing; the kitchen garden, the paddock, were soon left behind; long before Hubert had finished his good-byes I was walking up the elm avenue, and the rooks were cawing a welcome.

I encountered Bennett in the hall; he told me that Miss Sefton was in the garden, that I should find her by the sundial, and I proceeded there at once.

I should have known where to have looked for her, even if Bennett had not informed me; the seat by the sundial was her

favourite place. It was a quiet, sheltered spot, shut in by high walls covered with fruit-trees; the broad walk was planted with standard rose-trees, and every few yards a rose-covered arch spanned the path. In the rose season the effect was beautiful.

Aunt Catherine was in her usual seat, and Jasper, her especial pet, was strutting up and down before her, trailing his glorious tail behind him, followed by the mincing steps of his humbler consort, Beryl. She held out her hand to me, with her quiet, welcoming smile.

'You are late,' she said gently; 'I was beginning to fear that you were not coming after all.'

'Oh, it has been so tiresome!' I exclaimed, and I began to explain volubly the reason of my delay; but Aunt Catherine heard me rather absently—she was evidently thinking of something else.

'What does it matter?' she said, when I had finished; 'you are here now, and there is plenty of time for our talk. Look at Jasper!' for the beautiful creature had mounted the sundial and was slowly unfurling his plumes. 'Virginia had a headache, and remained in her room, so I had tea alone, and came out here. I wanted to see you especially this evening, Olga. Do you guess what it is I have to say to you?'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, do you mean that you are really going to tell me your business at St. Croix?'

'Yes, child, I am. I think, after all, it will be best. Virginia is against it—that is what has caused her headache; she knows I mean to tell you this evening. I am reposing great trust in you, Olga, but I know you are reliable.'

I squeezed her hand without making any reply; words were hardly needed, Aunt Catherine and I understood each other.

'Well, then, I may as well tell you at once that I am going to St. Croix solely and entirely on Virginia's account; that the business is hers, not mine.' She paused, as though she found it difficult to proceed. 'We have obtained a clue—at least, I hope to obtain it—a clue by which we may discover a treasure she has lost.'

Was that all? but her manner was very strange.

'What sort of treasure do you mean, Aunt Catherine?'

'I mean Virginia's son,' she answered calmly.

CHAPTER VIII

VIRGINIA'S STORY

“What is good for a bootless bene?”
The falconer to the lady said;
And she made answer: “Endless sorrow!”
For she knew her son was dead.’

ANON.

I UTTERED an exclamation, and almost jumped from my seat. Never, never in my whole life had I been so surprised! But Aunt Catherine did not look at me. She merely repeated the words, with a certain dreary inflection, as though she had learned them by rote:

‘I am going to look for Virginia’s son.’

‘But, Aunt Catherine,’ I stammered, turning very red, for I was so confused, so taken aback altogether, that I hardly knew what to say, ‘no one in Brookfield knows that Mrs. Lyndhurst ever had a child.’

‘Dr. Langham has always known it,’ she returned composedly. ‘And now you know our secret, Olga—the secret of my sister’s unhappy life. He was only a year old when she lost him, and that was five-and-twenty years ago.’

Five-and-twenty years! I could scarcely realise it. I knew that Mrs. Lyndhurst had married young, and that she was three or four years older than Aunt Catherine. Her son must be a full-grown man of six-and-twenty. How had she lost him? What did it all mean?

All at once I recalled the evening when Jem and I had wandered in the Hall garden, and we had encountered the weird, ghost-like figure in the Lady’s Walk; and again a sudden flash of memory brought before me vividly the pale face and silvery hair over which the white hood was drawn so closely; and the words sounded in my ears as though they were freshly uttered: ‘Oh, my sin! Will it never be condoned? Will there never be an end of all this

suspense and misery?' and 'God only knows!' uttered in a despairing voice.

'Olga'—and here Aunt Catherine looked at me pleadingly, and I could see she was much agitated—'my great fear in telling you this miserable story is this, that you will blame Virginia; but you must not—indeed, you must not. She has been very weak; she has suffered—and the pain has been too great for her. We are not all alike; some of us are stronger to endure than others. I would have you remember this, and not judge her harshly. Who should know her so well as I do? and I have never blamed her, except for marrying Paul Lyndhurst.'

'Will you tell me all about it, Aunt Catherine?'

'I will tell you as much as it is necessary for you to know; but there are some things that must not be repeated, neither do I care to dwell on the story of Virginia's mad infatuation for her lover. Why is it, Olga—but you are too young to answer such a question—why is it that an evil nature—an utterly perverted and immoral nature—can ever dominate and gain the mastery over an innocent one? Virginia was good—yes, in spite of her little faults and vanities, she was a good, pure-minded girl—but her love for Paul Lyndhurst blinded her. She would believe nothing against him—nothing.'

'I have heard—I think it was Hubert who told me—that Mr. Lyndhurst was a singularly handsome man.'

'You are right; I think his face was almost perfect. The features were finely cut, as we see them in Greek sculpture; his physique was magnificent; he was just a beautiful, soulless animal. I was very young then, not more than eighteen or nineteen, and very shy and diffident; but I had my ideal—every girl has that, I suppose.' She caught her breath and hurried on: 'I cared for goodness in a man more than any degree of attractiveness, and I used to shrink instinctively from the subtle sneer that lurked in Paul Lyndhurst's handsome eyes.'

'I remember once arguing with Virginia until I was on the verge of tears.

"'You must not have him," I said; "he is not good. I am sure he is not good, Virginia. He says horrid, sneering things in a polite way. Oh, his manners are fine—I know that—but he is inwardly cruel! I am sure of it. He dislikes old and plain people. He makes fun of them, and derides their little infirmities; and he is not kind to animals. See how he treated his dog yesterday! Oh, Virginia! do struggle against this infatuation! Rome is a bad place for you. Let us ask father to take us away. We shall be safer at Brookfield—dear old Brookfield!"

'But I might as well have spoken to the wind.

"You are prejudiced," she said coldly; "Paul said only yesterday that you had disliked him from the first, and that it was because he was poor and had no friends. You are hard on him, Catherine. He is very unhappy. He says he has not a friend in the world but me; that there is no hope for him if I forsake him; but I never will give him up—he knows that, my dear, noble Paul!"

'Ah, he had bewitched her, or she never could have used that word of Paul Lyndhurst.

'Of course, I know now, Olga, that I ought to have warned my father, but we were too much in awe of him for any such confidence. If our mother had lived I would have spoken to her at once; but our father—no, it was impossible. I dreaded his anger too much. It is a sad thing, Olga, when children fear their parents. Virginia had always been our father's favourite. She was a bold, high-spirited girl, and he was very proud of her. It was Virginia who was always the spokeswoman—who could coax him to do anything; but I was timid and awkward in his presence. It needed more courage than I possessed to tell him the state of things between Virginia and Paul Lyndhurst; and, as though to accelerate matters, father had taken a strong fancy to the young artist, and had him perpetually to the house.

'Our stay at Rome was drawing to a close, and I was beginning to breathe more freely, hoping that time and absence would weaken Virginia's unhappy attachment, when all at once the blow fell! Without giving me a hint of her rash resolve—without bidding me good-bye—Virginia left the house secretly one morning and was married to Paul Lyndhurst, and when the news reached us she was on her way to Venice with her husband! Olga, it is useless to dwell too much on a painful past. I will leave you to imagine my father's bitter anger and my own grief. I saw the letter he wrote in answer to her piteous plea for forgiveness—it was a cruel letter for any father to write; but I can make more allowances now. He told her that she was no child of his now, that he would never see her again, that he had done with her for ever. She had disgraced her name. He would never acknowledge the beggarly artist she called her husband. Her little fortune, bequeathed to her by her mother—about three thousand pounds—should be made over to her at once; but she need never expect a penny of his—it should all be Catherine's. Poor father, he was almost beside himself with anger and mortified love when he wrote that letter.'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, how dreadful!' for she paused a moment in her recital.

'Yes,' she replied gently; 'such scenes and such words are very dreadful to remember; one longs for a draught from Lethe sometimes. My child, those two years were the saddest years of my life. I had my own troubles, and the Hall was desolate to me without Virginia. I had never been my father's companion, and I could do little to comfort him in his trouble. In my heart I reproached him for his hardness; but I never dared to mention Virginia's name. Now and then during the first year of her absence she wrote to me, but her letters were very brief and unsatisfactory. She seldom mentioned her husband's name, or said she was happy. My questions on that point were left unanswered. They were always moving from place to place—one letter was from Naples, the next from Munich, a third from Basle. I never knew where to find her, and more than one of my letters came back to me. The last one I received was written in pencil, and told me of the birth of her boy.

"He is not like Paul," she wrote; "he is more like our family, and I mean to call him Basil, after our little brother who died. Perhaps when my father hears that, he may be touched. How I long to show you my baby, Catherine! He is such a pretty little fellow, and so good; he hardly ever cries. My husband does not wish to have him baptized. Paul is a freethinker, you know, and laughs at my superstition, as he calls it; but my baby shall not grow up a heathen. I am determined upon that. If there be no other way, one of those kind-looking priests at St. Sulpice shall baptize him. I would rather have him baptized in the Roman Catholic Church than have him a heathen; but there is plenty of time." The letter ended abruptly here; but a postscript had been added a few days later: "I have been ill again and could not finish this, I will send it as it is. Do not be anxious if you do not hear again soon. Paul does not like me to write; he says I have no one but him now. Oh, Cathy, darling, why did I not listen to you? I have sown the wind to reap the whirlwind. Baby is prettier than ever; he grows so fast. God bless you. Your loving sister, Virginia."

'I laid my letter on my father's desk. I had never dared to show him one before. When I went into the study the next morning it was gone; but he never spoke of it. I thought it had been destroyed; but after his death we found it in an old pocket-book he always carried about with him. The letter was creased and almost illegible, and in its folds was the tiny lock—scarcely more than a few hairs—poor Virginia had cut off her infant's head. I remember how bitterly Virginia cried when she saw it.'

As Aunt Catherine again paused her eyes were full of tears.

'Oh, it is all so sad—so sad,' she went on, 'it gives me the heartache even now to remember it. I noticed a change in my father from that day; he became more abstracted and melancholy, nothing seemed to interest him. At times he seemed restless and unsettled. Now and then, as we sat alone together, he with his book, and I with my embroidery, he would look at me fixedly, as though he wanted to say something; and then his lips would close more firmly than ever, and he would turn away and take up his book again. I used to wonder sometimes if he were thinking of Virginia, but I dared not ask him the question.

'One night—it was a wild autumnal night, I remember, for the wind was crashing among the elms, and I heard the fall of a great branch once—we were startled by the loud ringing of a bell. It was late, and the servants had just gone up to bed, so my father went to the door and undid the bolts himself, while I followed him.

'As he flung the door wide open, a tall veiled lady, muffled up in a foreign-looking mantle, quietly stepped into the hall.

'We were both much startled. "Madam——" began my father, in his quick, haughty way, but the lady put back her veil and looked at him. "Good Heavens! it is Virginia!" he exclaimed, turning very pale.

'“Yes, father, I am come back. Will you take me in? Shall I go down on my knees to you?” She laughed rather strangely; her eyes were wide and glittering. “Cathy, why do you not kiss me? Have you forgotten we are sisters? Do you know what I have done? I have run away from Paul! I have left him, and I have left——” but here her face became very white, she put out her hands as though feeling blindly for some support, and if my father had not caught her she would have fallen at his feet in that deathly swoon. We were unwilling to summon help, so we carried her between us, and, laying her down on the drawing-room couch, applied all possible remedies; but it was a long time before she recovered consciousness, and she did not speak to us again that night. She lay motionless, with closed eyes, only every now and then a convulsive shudder seemed to shake her from head to foot. If my father's anger had ever been bitter against her, it died a natural death now. He only seemed to remember that she had come back to him again. Her very helplessness and misery appealed strongly to his fatherhood. He sat beside the couch holding her hand, and every now and then stroking it, and once he looked at me pitifully, as though to demand sympathy. My poor father! the furrows of his hardness were broken up for ever!

I knew then how he had loved her, and how cruelly his pride in her had been wounded.

'She was sadly changed, our poor Virginia! Her girlish beauty was gone; she looked ten years older than when we had seen her last. Her face was drawn and haggard, and there were dark circles round her eyes. In the broken-down creature before us, who could have recognised our bright, high-spirited girl?

'I thought that night would never have passed. Now and then she opened her eyes and looked at us, but only a low moan escaped her lips. Towards morning my father roused the servants, and sent off one of them for Dr. Langham—it was old Dr. Langham then. A terrible fear had assailed us—Virginia's mind was unhinged by trouble! But when Dr. Langham arrived, he comforted us a little on this point.

"She has had a shock," he said decidedly; "very possibly a series of shocks, for she is worn almost to a skeleton, and it has brought on this attack of the nerves. From her appearance I should judge that she has not touched food for hours. We must be very careful," he continued by and by; "indeed, I may say there is urgent need of care. The brain is a very delicate piece of machinery at present; she is as much in possession of her reason as you or I, but the brain is torpid. These nervous disorders are very misleading to non-professional people—in extreme cases they are certainly approximate to insanity. Her mind is over-strained—unhinged, if you prefer the word. A little more, and I would not answer for the consequences."

'Dr. Langham was right; he was a clever man, and we soon realised the truth of his words. For some days Virginia lay in this strange torpid state; she was perfectly tractable, and would take food from our hands like a child; but she did not seem to recognise us—at least, she never spoke to us—only, when my father kissed her, she would turn aside, and lie with her face to the wall, moaning in a sort of heartbroken way.

"You must give Nature time," Dr. Langham would say; "every power of mind and body is exhausted at present. By and by, when she can speak, she will explain everything." And again he was right.

'About a fortnight passed, when one day I noticed a change in her. Dr. Langham noticed it too. "She is coming round," was all he said; "this restlessness is a good sign. Get her to speak, it will relieve her."

'But there was no need for any effort on my part. Dr. Langham had hardly left the room before I heard Virginia's voice calling me.

"He is wise—very wise," she said feebly. "Yes, let me talk, Cathy; let me get rid of all that is oppressing me"—here she put her hands on her breast, as though a weight were there. I lay down beside her on the bed, and she crept nearer, till her face was against my shoulder—and then the whole miserable story came out. It was well my father was not there; no man could have controlled himself and listened quietly. Long before she had finished, my tears had dried up in a blaze of womanly anger—that he should dare to treat a Sefton so!

'I can only touch briefly on that story. If Paul Lyndhurst had ever loved Virginia—and there was grave suspicion for this doubt—his love did not survive the honeymoon. Before many weeks of their ill-starred union had elapsed, he had thrown off his disguise and shown himself in his true colours. The first quarrel had been about her money: he chose to consider himself injured by the smallness of her fortune; her father's threat of disinheriting her in my favour made him savage. "If you had played your cards better we should not have landed ourselves in this hole," he said to her angrily. It was in vain poor Virginia protested that it was no fault of hers; that to please him, and him only, she had consented to the secret marriage. He only flung away from her with a covert sneer at the easiness with which he had won her.

'Oh, he was a bad man, this Paul Lyndhurst, a cold, black-hearted villain. Think of the misery of a pure-minded, delicately-nurtured woman, carefully sheltered from all knowledge of evil, suddenly finding herself tied for life to a man without a shred of honour, without principles, without religion, and, lastly, without love for herself.

'Alas! there were darker shades in Paul Lyndhurst's character, which she found out by and by: an inveterate gambler, he soon squandered half her little fortune; and to complete her disgust, she soon discovered he drank deeply. Poor unhappy Virginia! nothing but her pride, and her despair of her father's forgiveness, prevented her from leaving him and returning home; and by and by another reason kept her. After the birth of her boy her husband treated her better, but this peaceful state of things did not last long. After a time his cruel moroseness returned; something had gone wrong with him—his work suffered, and, as usual, he wreaked his ill-temper on his wife. Virginia had been long in recovering from her confinement; before she had regained her strength they left St. Croix, where her boy was born, for Havre, and here she had a second illness.

'On her recovery she saw a change for the worse in Paul. He had always been uncertain in his temper, but now his moods were

savage; he seemed as though he hated her, and was determined to embitter her existence. There were cruel scenes, and Virginia, weak and broken-spirited by daily insults and ill-treatment, conceived at last a perfect terror of her husband. The very sound of his voice or his footstep threw her into a state of nervousness that was almost indescribable. One night—but I will spare you the details, Olga—Virginia, almost wild with terror and shame, rushed out of the house like some hunted thing, and wandered up and down the dark streets, with only one thought, to hide herself where Paul could never find her again. By some strange fortune she found herself presently on the quay. Suddenly it occurred to her that at this hour the boat would be starting for Southampton. Like one in a nightmare she took out her purse. She had sufficient money, so she paid her fare, muttered something about her luggage being too late, and, going down to the cabin, threw herself upon a vacant berth.'

I could keep silence no longer.

'But her child, Aunt Catherine?—her little boy?'

Aunt Catherine shook her head. She looked at me almost imploringly.

'Do you not understand, Olga? She was not herself—my poor Virginia! The cruel pain had blotted out her memory.'

'Do you mean she had forgotten him?'

Aunt Catherine bowed her head solemnly.

'Don't, Olga—don't speak yet. Did I not say you must not blame her? I know what you are thinking, "Can a woman forget her sucking-child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" But that such things can be we are also told in the same text; but let me repeat her own words:

"I knew nothing—I thought of nothing, but to escape Paul. My brain was on fire. Perhaps I was mad. God grant it, but I fear I was not! Only I had forgotten everything in my unreasoning terror. In the darkness of night, just before dawn, my memory returned. I heard the groaning of the paddle-wheels and the long wash of the waves. A child in the next berth woke up crying. The sound went through me like an electric shock. My baby! I had forgotten my baby! I had left him asleep in his little cot, with his *bonne* beside him, and had come down to Paul, who had been already cursing at my delay. He had bade me fetch my bonnet and mantle, for some wild expedition he had planned. It was my refusal to accompany him that had brought on the shameful scene. I thought he meant to kill me, for he was mad with drink, and I fled out of the house."

'Poor thing—poor thing! And she did not go back to him?'

'No; her one thought was to take refuge with us. She kept saying to herself all the remainder of the way, "Cathy is kind; she will bring me my baby." But when she reached us her strength was gone; that night of agony had done its work.'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine!'—and I was crying now—'surely you or the Squire tried to find her child for her? It is too dreadful to think of, that dear baby left with the cruel man!'

'My dear, I could not leave Virginia, and my father was too old and broken for such a business. But we put it into the hands of our solicitor, to gain possession of the child; and a trustworthy person was sent over to Havre to settle matters with Paul Lyndhurst. There had been an inevitable delay of some weeks. When the agent arrived he was too late. Two days before, Paul Lyndhurst, accompanied by the child and the *bonne*, had left Havre; but no one knew where they were gone.

"Monsieur had been in a terrible humour ever since madame had left," the woman of the house had informed him; "nothing had given him satisfaction. When old Lizette had taken the boy to him he had sworn at her and bade her keep the brat out of his sight. Lizette was a bold woman to accompany him, for monsieur was one who feared neither *le bon Dieu* nor the devil, but he paid her well, and—well, one does anything for money. Lizette was a proper nurse; she was devoted to Monsieur Bébè. Monsieur Bébè was smiling like an angel when they left the house." And this was all: father and child had vanished as though the earth had swallowed them up. In vain we advertised and spent time and money in the search. My father and I went again to Rome. France, Germany, Switzerland were all searched by our agents; but nothing could be heard of Paul Lyndhurst. Once we thought we were on the right track; an artist answering to the description had been found nearly frozen to death on some Alpine pass; but on questioning the monks he proved to be a German.

'Olga, you may imagine the rest: the heart-sick suspense and longing, on Virginia's part—the alternation from hope to despair. One moment she believed her boy was dead, the next she cried out that he was alive, and that Paul had depraved him and made him like himself. Her boy's future was ruined, and all through her! Yes, you may guess the rest: Virginia's trouble has been the burden of my life. It is a good many years since we relinquished all hopes of ever finding Basil; but the thought that, if he be living, his grandfather's will has made him master of the Hall has given us a new incentive for action. A few weeks ago we received information from one of our agents that Paul Lyndhurst was dead. It is to verify this that I am going to St. Croix; but

I cannot induce Virginia to accompany me, poor dear! She will have it that he may not be dead, and that she is safer at the Hall.

'The priest who is our real informant of Paul's death is supposed to be the same who baptized Basil; anyhow, it was at St. Croix, at the very St. Sulpice that Virginia mentioned in her letter, that the child was secretly baptized. Now you know all, Olga, and I am terribly weary. I can talk no more.'

CHAPTER IX

‘HE WAS SO PRETTY, OLGA!’

‘I now must change these notes to tragic.’—MILTON.

AUNT CATHERINE’S tired face certainly verified her words, and I pressed her to go back to the house and rest.

‘Perhaps it will be best,’ she returned after a moment’s hesitation. ‘I can see my story has excited you; it would be well for us not to discuss it now. Go home, dear child, and to-morrow come to me again, and I will tell you my plans for next week.’

And then we walked together to the Hall door, and parted without another word. As I looked back for a moment to wave my adieux, I saw Mrs. Lyndhurst watching us from her window; but she gave no sign of recognition; on the contrary, when she saw she had attracted my notice, she drew down the blind hastily, and I walked rapidly down the avenue.

The first gong sounded as I entered the house, so there was no time to lose. I dressed hurriedly and took my place at the table, and tried to talk as usual; but my manner must have been strange, for I saw Kitty look at me inquisitively once or twice; she was as sharp as a needle, and was very quick to detect the least thing amiss. When we went back to the drawing-room she followed me under the pretext of showing me her work; she was smocking a little frock for Girlie.

‘Is there anything the matter, Olga?’ she whispered. ‘I hope there is nothing wrong at the Hall!’

‘What should be wrong?’ I answered shortly, for this sisterly espionage annoyed me.

‘I don’t know; only your eyes look as though you have been crying.’

‘Nonsense!’ still more abruptly; ‘you are always fancying

things, Kitty. Mrs. Lyndhurst is not very well; but that is nothing new. I sat with Aunt Catherine in the garden, and we had a good long talk. Jasper was lovely. He spread out his tail just to attract our attention, and Beryl kept pecking at Aunt Catherine's gown, to remind her of the sweet cakes he had promised her. What beautiful creatures they are!

'And which day do you start?' asked Kitty, not particularly interested in these details.

This was embarrassing. I coloured up, and answered rather awkwardly:

'Aunt Catherine did not tell me. I am to know to-morrow. She was tired, and I did not stop so very long.'

'Only two hours,' was the somewhat sarcastic rejoinder, and then Kitty carried away her work.

I had not deceived her in the least. In her own mind she was quite sure that something had happened. It was trying to have such a tell-tale face, and really that habit of blushing over every trifle was extremely ridiculous. I was thankful that Jem was not there to add to my embarrassment. Everything was tiresome that evening. Hubert, as usual, requested some music, and as Kitty was busy, I was obliged to remain at the piano for the next hour to accompany Mr. Cunningham's flute. The pieces were long and difficult, and I played worse than usual. To add to my vexations, Mr. Cunningham begged my pardon at every mistake, and entreated me to go over the erring passage again.

'No one is listening,' he observed; 'and we may as well get the thing perfect. Let us try that page again, Miss Leigh. One, two, three.'

The mild 'tout, tout' of the flute recommenced. Mr. Cunningham's head wagged contentedly over his beloved instrument. Crash went the pedal. I was fast losing patience and temper under the ordeal, when Harry interposed. He had been watching us both for some time, though he had only been pretending to tease Rollo. At the next break-down he came to my rescue:

'Why don't you shut up that beastly noise, Cunningham?' he said quite crossly. 'Don't you see Miss Leigh is tired out? You ought not to trespass on her good-nature. Here you have been a good hour blowing on that confounded flute, and no one has a chance of speaking a word!'

I am afraid Harry was very rude; but we were none of us too polite to Mr. Cunningham. I do hate a rich, lumpish young man.

Mr. Cunningham unscrewed his flute. He was affronted, and no wonder, by Harry's uncivil remarks.

'You have no soul for music, Vivian,' he returned stiffly.

'People who cannot play themselves, and know absolutely nothing of music, generally set themselves up for critics. Thank you, Miss Leigh; you played that last passage charmingly. I like a staccato movement,' but I would not listen to his heavy encomiums any longer. I gave Harry a grateful smile and slipped away to my room.

I am afraid to say how many hours it was before I slept that night. Mrs. Lyndhurst's sad story haunted me. I went over it point by point, and again my tears flowed as I thought of the miserable mother who had lost her child so strangely. My heart ached for her, and yet my sympathy was not unmixed with blame. 'How could she have done it?' that is what I kept saying to myself over and over again. It was right for her to leave that wicked husband. No one could blame her for that, if she had only taken her baby with her; but to forget her own child—and yet she was not mad—to leave that boy in his father's power! Oh, how could she, how could she? that was always the summing-up. No; I could not understand it. The utter horror of it all baffled me. It is almost impossible for youth, with its healthy, natural views of life, to comprehend the workings of a morbid temperament, dominated by a subtle and cruel power. The complex mysteries of human nature are not to be unriddled by the young. Such a case as Mrs. Lyndhurst's needed the wide comprehension of a psychological student—wise in the science that is most conversant with the phenomena of the mind.

If I had been older, the difficulty would have been easier of solution, for no thoughtful person who has lived long in this world will deny the singular contradictions and surprises of human nature. The man, the woman, acts in a diametrically different way from what we expected; strange things are done on sudden emergencies—there is utter collapse of the reasoning powers. Can human nature betray itself after this fashion? 'Look at Judas, at Peter, at a hundred examples of failures,' would be the answer of the psychologist; "'Judge not' is the command of the All-knowing and All-merciful.' When I went to sleep that night I felt I loved Mrs. Lyndhurst less; but none the less I pitied her sincerely. When the morning came I was still in the same mind, only I was determined Aunt Catherine should never know the change in my feelings. I went up to the Hall in the afternoon. Aunt Catherine was writing letters in the library. She received me with her usual kindness, and began at once talking about her plans. It was Saturday, and we were to start the following Wednesday. We were to take an early train to town, lunch at a hotel, and go down by the boat-train to Southampton; the boat would not start until

midnight. There was a little more talk about arrangements, a few questions about luggage, and so on ; and then Aunt Catherine turned again to her davenport.

'These letters must go by the afternoon post,' she said quietly. 'Will you go up to Virginia now, Olga? and we will meet again at tea-time;' and as I seemed a little taken aback at this proposition, she continued: 'Virginia wishes to see you. She knows we were talking yesterday; she made me promise to send you up to her.'

Could anything be more embarrassing? But I had no excuse ready; Hubert and Kitty were paying parochial visits—no one at home wanted me—so I was obliged reluctantly to leave Aunt Catherine's comfortable presence, and go in search of Mrs. Lyndhurst. On my way upstairs I encountered Marsden. I thought she looked at me a little oddly as she drew back to let me pass.

'Mrs. Lyndhurst is in her sitting-room, I believe?' I asked, by way of saying something, for I knew quite well where I should find her.

'Yes, ma'am; but, Miss Olga,' addressing me rather hesitatingly, 'my mistress is very poorly this afternoon. She seems low and nervous. It is cheerfulness she wants, not any sort of sad talk—I mean, you will be careful with her, Miss Olga?'

I never knew Marsden strange in her manner before; her round, good-natured face looked quite prim and solemn. Was it possible that she was in her lady's confidence? She was an old servant, and a very faithful one, but somehow I hoped Marsden did not know about little Basil.

Mrs. Lyndhurst was in her usual place. I am afraid as I greeted her my manner was a little constrained, for she looked in my face very searchingly as she held my hand. After a moment she dropped it, but she did not ask me to sit down, or question me in her usual pleasant way.

'Aunt Catherine told me you wanted to see me, Mrs. Lyndhurst,' I began rather awkwardly.

'Yes,' she returned sadly; 'I wanted to see for myself. "When she comes into the room I shall know," that is what I said. You are not a good actor, my dear—has any one told you that before? I daresay Jem has. Your face tells everything in a moment. You were sorry that I sent for you; you have no wish to see me—that is all written very legibly, Olga.'

'Please don't, Mrs. Lyndhurst.'

'Is it painful for you to know that? Young people are seldom hypocrites; they are too eager; their impatience betrays them. It is better for you to be true, Olga, even though you do condemn me.'

That is why I said to Catherine, "Do not tell the child—do not, do not." It is the young who are the most pitiless of our judges. They make no allowances; with them black is black and white white—there are no medium shades, no mercy, no extenuation. You have done wrong; you must suffer for it. Was it not Draco whose laws were written in blood? Well, the young are Draco-like.'

I was nearly crying by this time. Why would she say such dreadful things? and how was I to answer her? It was cruel of Aunt Catherine to expose me to such an ordeal!

'I can read the question in your eyes, Olga,' she went on. 'You have pretty eyes, my dear, very soft and gray; but they have a terrible way of asking questions. "How had you the heart to do it, you unnatural mother?" that is what they say.'

'Oh, hush, please, Mrs. Lyndhurst!'

'My dear, I cannot hush; there is a time for everything—Solomon said that, did he not?—and my time has come for speaking. "How could you do it?" Olga, that is the question I have asked myself for twenty-five years, and I have not found the answer yet.'

It was terrible to hear her; her voice was thin and strained, and there was a pinched look about her face; but she took no notice of my entreaties to her to spare herself and me.

'If I have sinned, I have had my punishment. Think of a punishment lasting five-and-twenty years!—five-and-twenty years!' Can I ever forget the dreary tone in which she repeated these words? 'It is more than your whole lifetime, Olga.'

I felt a curious revulsion of pity as she spoke. My youthful severity was not proof against such misery: without asking myself again how such things could be, I threw my arms round Mrs. Lyndhurst, and begged her not to talk so sadly.

'Indeed I will not blame you!' I said earnestly, and I fully meant what I said. 'It is not easy for me to understand. I am so young, you see, and so happy, and I have never been tried; but, indeed, I will not be hard. Only you must not talk like this.'

For there was a wildness in her manner that frightened me, for it brought back the scene in the Lady's Walk.

My caress soothed her; she was one who depended on sympathy. The rigid muscles relaxed; a softer look came into her eyes. She stroked my hand without speaking for a few minutes, and then she said more quietly:

'Yes, I am to be pitied. God only knows what I have suffered all these years! Oh, he was so pretty, Olga—my baby! He had such dear little hands and feet, and such a cooing voice. Somehow

I always think of him still as my baby, and yet he is a full-grown man.'

I was silent. It would not hurt her to talk in this quiet fashion; perhaps it might be a relief. It certainly pained me to hear her; but what of that?—were we not told to bear one another's burdens?

'I have always dreamt of him,' she went on. 'Sometimes the dreams were happy, but at other times they were terrible—terrible! They were never quite the same. I used to dream of him as a little child, and then as a schoolboy. Once he was showing me his prizes. I was opening one book after another. "Basil Theodore Lyndhurst" was written in every one. I called him Theodore after my father—the gift of God. I used to say it over to myself sometimes. It was so true—my baby was the gift of God!'

I would not interrupt her by a word, and she went on softly, as though talking to herself.

'Once he had some childish ailment; he was feverish and suffering, and I remember how frightened I was. "If my baby dies, I shall die too," I said to Lizette. She was a good old creature. She was rocking the old-fashioned Flemish cradle as I spoke, and she looked up and shook her head at me. "Le bon Dieu will not take the little angel," she said solemnly. "He knows, and the Blessed Mary knows, that madame has trouble enough. It is only our Lady of Sorrows who has her heart pierced through and through with pain. Madame will not have to suffer more. She is young and feeble, and le bon Dieu knows that." Poor old Lizette! she was very good to me. But, Olga, she little knew, if I had lost my baby then I should have wept like other mothers, and have been comforted. I should not have wept tears of blood all these years.'

'God has watched over him, dear Mrs. Lyndhurst.'

'Ah! so Catherine says. That is how she comforts me. If it were not for that thought I must have lost my reason. Now and then all hope fails me, and I dream that he is dead. When I wake it seems to me that I must search the world over, only to find his grave.'

'Poor, poor Mrs. Lyndhurst!'

'But that is not my worst fear'—and here she shuddered—'there are times when far more terrible thoughts assail me. What if he should have become like his father? Catherine has told you about my husband. Do you think a man like Paul would be a fit guardian for an innocent child?'

'He had Lizette,' I interposed, eager to give a crumb of comfort; for she had touched now on the very point that troubled me.

'Yes; but he would not require a nurse long; Lizette would be dismissed, and then how would it fare with my boy—no mother to counteract his father's teaching? What if he should have grown up a freethinker? What if he should have learned to scoff at religion, at women, at everything—like Paul? Could he touch pitch and not be defiled? Could he live for years with that godless, bad-hearted man, and not be utterly depraved? Oh, if this be the case, I pray—I pray most solemnly that I may never see my son's face in this life.'

Her voice had grown more intense, more tragically earnest. A cold shiver ran through me at her words. This awful probability had already crossed my mind. If it were true, oh, how much better it would be to stumble on some foreign tombstone, some wooden cross, in a far-off cemetery, and read the name of Basil Theodore Lyndhurst engraved there! If I could only find some word to comfort her! And then I remembered the beautiful story of Monica and St. Augustine: the reckless prodigal feeding on husks; the weeping, praying mother; the consolatory speech, so strangely prophetic, spoken by a holy man—'The child of so many prayers and tears cannot be lost.' Mrs. Lyndhurst kissed me when I had finished the simple story. If she had heard it before she did not say so, but a faint smile came to her face.

'It may be so—God grant it!—and my prayers may have been an invisible shield to Basil. I will try to think so, and then my pain will be less.'

'Yes; and Aunt Catherine hopes that she may hear some news of him at St. Croix.'

'The news will be very vague, I fear,' she returned sadly. 'Père Lefevre, the priest who baptized my little Basil, has only lately returned to St. Genette. You know St. Croix is only the suburb. He is again attached to the parish church, St. Sulpice. We have heard a rumour that he has been attending the deathbed of an English artist. The description tallies with that of my husband.'

'Is that all?' for I thought at least that some clue had been discovered of Basil.

'That is all at present; it is for Catherine to find out all she can from Père Lefevre. If it be not under the seal of confession he will tell us what he knows. These priests have kind hearts. If we could only find old Lizette!—but she must be long dead.'

'Was she very old?'

'Perhaps not. It is difficult to judge of the age of these peasants. Their hard work makes them look older than they really are. She might have been fifty.'

'That would make her seventy-five now.'

'Yes, if she be living, but I doubt it. There is nothing but doubt and regret all round. Even if I find him, even if Catherine is successful, and one day I shall hear Basil is alive and is coming home, do you think even such blessed news as that can atone for the past? Think what I have lost, never to see him in his childhood, his boyhood, his early manhood, to have some strange bearded man suddenly come to me and say, "You are my mother; I am Basil, your son. Where is my grandfather's property that belongs to me? Where are my goods that I ought to have enjoyed all these years?" How am I to recognise him whom I saw last as a baby?'

'Yes, yes, I see what you mean; it is very hard for you.'

'Will he be like Paul, and frighten me with his father's likeness? Will he love the stranger who calls herself his mother? Oh, they talk of nature, of instinct, but instinct is sometimes blind. I may say to him, "Come, embrace me, my son;" and he may answer coldly, "How am I to feel you are my mother?—affection in a man cannot be forced. We have never been anything to each other; the whole world has divided us. How am I to know my English mother from any other woman?"'

'Is this how you have tortured yourself all these years, Mrs. Lyndhurst?'

'Yes, Olga. Ask Catherine, for she has been my guardian angel; ask my good faithful Marsden how I have tried them. There were times when, like Cain, my punishment was more than I could bear—then it was that Catherine was a tower of strength to me. "You have still a sister," that is what she would say to me. I could not have borne my life without Catherine.'

Just then Marsden interrupted us. She had a tea-tray in her hand. As she set it down she looked at her mistress's agitated countenance with disapproving eyes.

'You have talked too much, ma'am,' she said, with a solemn shake of her head. 'I warned Miss Olga; but I see it has been no use. Now you will have one of your bad headaches.'

'It was not my fault, Marsden,' I pleaded; for the good creature seemed greatly disturbed.

'No, Mary, you must not scold the child. I was obliged to talk, and I think she has done me good. Go down now, my dear, and leave me with Marsden. We quite understand each other, and she knows she may scold me as much as she likes;' and she smiled up in Marsden's face, but the faithful soul was hardly mollified. She saw signs of suffering in her mistress's drawn face and weary eyes, and was anxious for my departure.

Aunt Catherine was awaiting me in the drawing-room. She looked at me scrutinisingly as I sat down beside her.

‘Well, Olga, can you forgive Virginia now?’

I forget what my answer was, but I know it satisfied Aunt Catherine, for she took my hand and said soothingly:

‘Don’t cry, dear; I am afraid you have had a painful scene with my poor sister; but it was better for you to see for yourself—now you know what my life has been.’

‘Oh, Aunt Catherine, how could you have borne it all these years?’

‘That I can hardly tell you. We all have our work in life—Virginia is my work.’

‘But it must have been so depressing.’

‘I would not allow it to depress me. I had many duties—the care of our property, our poor, the search for Basil as our rightful heir, the old name to keep up in the county. Then I had my pleasures, my books and garden, and’—here she looked at me very sweetly—‘the affection of my adopted daughter.’

‘Oh, Aunt Catherine, am I indeed a comfort to you?’

Her answer took me by surprise, for she was rarely demonstrative, and seldom expressed her feelings.

‘Sometimes I think you are my greatest comfort. You are a great deal to me, Olga; you always have been. Now drink your tea, my dear, and let us talk of something else.’

CHAPTER X

A FAIRY GODMOTHER AND A PRINCE

'I give you my word I am heart-whole.'—*Redgauntlet*.

'If we cannot be better friends, do not at least let us entertain harder or worse thoughts of each other than we have now.'—WORDSWORTH.

AUNT CATHERINE kept me with her a long time. She saw that I was much upset, and she wished to change the current of my thoughts, and as I still seemed low-spirited and unlike my usual cheerful self, she took me up to her room under the pretext of showing me a new travelling rug that she had just bought. After which she unlocked her wardrobe and brought out her jewel casket.

'I have never shown you my trinkets, Olga,' she said quietly, 'and I know girls love to see pretty things. These all belong to me. Virginia's are at our bankers'. She has never worn a single article of jewellery these five-and-twenty years, with the exception of one or two diamond rings; and as her ornaments are much handsomer than mine, it was hardly safe to keep them in the house.'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, what lovely things!' I exclaimed in ecstasy, as she opened one case after another, and showed me their glittering contents. 'I think I have seen that ruby pendant before; you wore it when you went to the Collingwoods'—that night I helped you dress, and you wore your black satin. I know Kitty told me how well you looked—the best-dressed woman in the room.'

'What a distinction!' she returned, smiling at my enthusiasm, but I knew she liked the little compliment. 'Well, Olga, you seem entranced with my treasures. I suppose you think me enviable to be the owner of all those fine things?'

I am afraid I did think so.

'They give me very little pleasure,' she went on, without

waiting for my answer. 'I suppose if Basil be living these will go one day to his wife. That is why Virginia hoards hers so jealously. You see they are chiefly old heirlooms. They have been in our family for years and years. Do you see that enamel pendant set round with pearls—see how discoloured the pearls are with age—they say that belonged to the Lady Gwendoline, and that Ralph of the Iron-Heart gave it to her. No one has worn it since—it would have been considered unlucky; but they unclasped it from her neck as she lay in her coffin. Think of the contrast, a love-token reposing on the shrivelled neck of an aged woman! If it were not for the knowledge that love is eternal, and that the heart cannot grow old, one would disbelieve the reality of such things.'

'Lady Gwendoline's story is so terribly sad.'

'It is not sadder than many other women's stories,' she answered, and her tone was a little peculiar. 'Not so sad as Virginia's, for example. If Gwendoline had accepted her fate, and had not bewailed over her misery until her poor brain was crazed, she would have led a more peaceful existence, doing her daily work with patience until death called her to rejoin her lover. Poor soul, the truth was revealed to her at last! Do you remember her dying words: "Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning"?''

Aunt Catherine's manner had grown a little solemn.

'There are thousands of unspoken and unwritten stories—some of them as sad as poor Gwendoline's. Love comes to most women, but it does not always bring happiness with it. Some hide their pain like the famous Spartan boy of old hid his fox. They keep their own secret unflinchingly to the end; others take it meekly as their appointed cross. "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter"—I would write those words on many a single woman's grave.'

'Aunt Catherine,' I began timidly, but she stopped me by showing me another trinket.

'The others are heirlooms, as I told you, Olga; but my father gave me this, and I have always meant it for you—don't blush so, child. I suppose I may give you a trinket if I like, and I know you have so few pretty things.'

This was the truth, for my mother had been a poor vicar's daughter, and her few simple ornaments had been given her by her husband. Only a bracelet and a ring or two of no particular value had come into my possession.

'But, Aunt Catherine, this is far, far too beautiful for me!' I gasped.

'Why so?' pretending to misunderstand me; 'it will look very well on your round, white throat, and it is so simple and girlish.'

'It is perfectly exquisite,' I stammered, and indeed it was very unique and uncommon. It was a necklace formed of a single row of gems—all of them different—set very lightly. Some of the stones were costly, others less so, and the effect was extremely good.

'Do you like it, Olga? I am so glad. I have always meant it for you. Now help me to clear up all this finery. If there ever be such a person, Basil's wife will have ample choice, will she not? for all these must go by right to her. There, let me lock them up safely; and now you must run home, or Virginia will be wondering what has become of me.'

I carried off my treasure and showed it proudly to Hubert, who was sitting alone in the drawing-room. He examined it curiously, and then looked at me with rather an odd expression.

'Do you admire it, Hubert? is it not kind of Aunt Catherine to give it to me?'

'It is very good of her. I think it extremely handsome,' he returned in his precise way. 'You are a lucky girl, Olga. There is no doubt at all that Miss Sefton is much attached to you.'

'That is nothing new,' I replied pertly, for I thought his manner rather tiresome.

'But it is more evident now. Jem was only saying something of the sort the last evening he was at home. You see neither Mrs. Lyndhurst nor Miss Sefton is young, and they have no heir. So, as Jem says——' but I was not going to hear what Jem did say, and I took away my necklace rather crossly, for it annoyed me to see Hubert dangling it on his fingers, and peering at it through his spectacles while he talked such nonsense.

'I am quite sure Aunt Catherine will never leave me a penny of her money, if that is what you mean,' I observed in a vexed voice; 'and what is more, I do not want it; and I cannot bear you and Jem to say such things—it is dreadfully mercenary, and——'

'What a silly child you are!' he replied good-humouredly; 'but there, Jem and I will keep our thoughts to ourselves if they annoy you. I hope you will show Kitty your necklace.'

And then I marched off with a good deal of dignity. How tiresome of Hubert and Jem to think of such nonsense! But of course they did not know of Basil's existence, so perhaps they were not so much to be blamed, after all. I was doubly anxious now for poor Mrs. Lyndhurst to find her son, if only to prevent people thinking of such ridiculous things.

I went up to the nursery to find Kitty; on Saturday evenings she was always up there for an hour helping nurse. Nurse was busy in the inner room, and Kitty was sitting by the window putting in clean tuckers in the children's Sunday frocks. The twins had just been saying their prayers; they were standing by their mother in their little blue dressing-gowns, looking fresh and fair from their ablutions.

'May we stay a little, mother?' exclaimed Jessie eagerly, as she perceived me.

'Auntie will soon be going away,' observed Mab as a conclusive argument.

And then they both climbed up in my lap and pleaded for a story.

'It must be a Sunday story, I am afraid,' finished Jessie, 'because we have just said our prayers and hymn, and mother would not like fairy stories after that.'

'No, darling, you are quite right,' returned Kitty. 'But, indeed, you must not keep them, Olga; it is quite time for them to be in bed.'

'Let me show them this first,' I suggested, opening the case. And then there was an exclamation from mother and daughters.

'What a beauty you will look in it, auntie!' from Jessie.

'Auntie is quite a beauty without that,' contradicted Mab—oh, the lovely innocence of childhood!—'but she will look ever so much nicer in it—quite a grand lady.'

'Let me see it, children dear. Aunt Olga meant to show it to me.' And Kitty held it in her hand admiringly. 'Yes, it is very handsome; it will just suit you, Olga. Miss Sefton is extremely generous.'

But though she said no more, I could read her thought: 'The ladies have no heir, and they are fond of Olga!' Good gracious, how I longed to shout 'Basil Theodore Lyndhurst' into her pretty little ear!

The little girls left us reluctantly after this, and then Wilfred came in to say his prayers. I always liked to watch Kitty with her children. Her tired face—and how very, very tired she always looked now!—had a soft, motherly expression on it.

'Mother, why do you always stroke my head when I say my prayers?' Wilfred asked suddenly. 'Is it to keep time with the words? I think I am too sleepy to say my hymn; please let me off.'

'I will say it for you, Willie.'

And as the little fellow nestled up against her, she sang it in a low, crooning voice that was as good as a lullaby. Nurse carried

him off half-asleep after this, and Kitty turned to her work again.

'Do let me help you,' I pleaded; but she shook her head, smiling.

'There is so little to do, and I like doing it, Olga. I do so love working for my children; they will not always be little; when they are grown up they will not need me. Don't you think Mab is growing very fast?'

'Yes; she is much taller than Jessie.'

'She is quite a little mother to Willie and baby now, and she is so nice to her father. Hubert was only saying so yesterday. If anything were to happen to me—I mean, if they lost me—Mab would take care of them all.'

'Thank you, Kitty; I suppose you have forgotten my existence,' I returned, in a half-affronted tone. 'Mab indeed!'

Kitty laughed—she could not help it—but her tone was still melancholy.

'I beg your pardon, Olga. I thought, of course, you would be married. You do not suppose that I should ever ask you to sacrifice yourself for my children? What would Jem say?'

'Whatever he liked. Kitty, why will you talk in this doleful fashion? It is quite ridiculous. Mab and Jessie are both so pretty that they will be sure to marry young. Mab would just do for Harry, when she grows up, and then you and Hubert will be Darby and Joan. What a handsome old couple you will be!'

Kitty looked at me thoughtfully, as though she were trying to imagine the picture.

'Hubert is always saying things like that—"When the children leave us," "When Wilfred is a man," and so on. It gives me rather a shiver to hear him.'

'Why! You are very incomprehensible this evening.'

'Oh, I don't know'—folding up her work. 'I never think of the future. I cannot imagine myself old. It takes all my strength to live my daily life; I am too tired to look beyond. I have all I want now—Hubert and the children, and you and Jem. I have a sort of faith that as long as my children need me I shall be here. I know you think me odd, Olga, but my mother died young, and I suppose that gave me the notion that perhaps I should never be old either.'

I looked at her anxiously. Kitty was always prone to low spirits. Was it my fancy, or did she look a little thinner and more fragile than usual? 'Want of tone,' Dr. Langham called it. Well, no one thought much of that.

'I hope you do not talk to Hubert in this way,' I observed, in a scolding tone.

'Oh no; it would only make him unhappy, poor fellow! he takes too much care of me now. I don't know what Hubert would do without me, Olga.'

'I don't know what any of us would do without you,' I returned, with a remorseful kiss or two, for how often Jem and I had been cross with Kitty! 'Now, pray—pray don't talk any more in this ghoul-like manner—it is just overwrought nerves—for you will tire yourself so dreadfully; and oh! how angry Hubert would be if he heard you! He would send for Dr. Langham at once, and order you up to bed.'

'That is just why I do not tell him,' she returned; and a little mischievous sparkle came to her eyes. 'He is so fussy, dear old fellow, and makes so much of every little ailment, so I just keep my bad feelings to myself, and never tell him what makes me so cross sometimes.'

'Well, you may tell me instead'—a great effort of magnanimity on my part, for I did hate talking about ailments, and presentiments, and all kinds of doleful things; and Kitty's remarks were so often set in the minor key. To my surprise, she thanked me quite affectionately.

'May I, indeed, Olga? That is so kind and sisterly of you! I daresay it is all fancy, and that talking it over comfortably with you will do me good. You see, when one has a husband, one is obliged to think of his feelings; and Hubert is very easily depressed. So it will be nice to speak of my troublesome feelings to you.'

Nice for Kitty, perhaps! But I was not the woman to shirk my word; and, after all, Kitty had lots of worries. I thought of Aunt Catherine's noble example as I went to my room, and the burden she had so patiently borne all these years. Perhaps she had wanted to be married, and had given up some one she loved to stay with her afflicted sister. I thought what a good woman she must be, and I made a resolution to be more to Kitty, and to help her as far as possible over the rough places of life; and again those touching words of Amiel came into my mind: 'Oh, be swift to love—make haste to be kind.'

Kitty's plaintive conversation made me secretly uneasy, though I would not allow myself to say so. Most likely the tragical talk of the afternoon had unhinged me—even a healthy young person can be nervous. I was tired and creepy, and did not make allowances for Kitty's unconscious exaggerations. And yet I have always noticed that people who talk much about their feelings—who count their own pulsations and regulate their own heart-beats—are liable to overstep the truth, and to draw too largely upon their imagination.

I found myself watching Kitty during the evening. She was certainly a little quieter than usual. She brought her work to the table where Hubert was playing backgammon with Harry, and sat beside him quite contentedly. Once he told her that she was trying her eyes and had better go to bed.

'You work too hard for us all, little woman,' he said, looking at her tenderly.

I saw Kitty slip her hand into his :

'Do let me stop a little longer ; it is so nice and quiet, and I like being with you.'

Harry was rattling the dice rather noisily, and did not overhear the little conjugal whisper.

'I dice not above seven times a week,' observed Harry sententiously. 'Mr. Leigh, are you aware I am quoting Shakespeare? Actually those words were written by the immortal William. Mark the line, pregnant with meaning: "I dice not more than seven times a week."'

'I congratulate you on your memory, Vivian,' returned Hubert dryly. 'Whose throw is it?—mine? Deuce!—ace—come, that's lucky! Kitty, my dear, I mean to beat this fellow hollow ; he has grown too conceited.'

So, after eleven years, Kitty still cared to sit by Hubert. Matrimony was not such a dull affair as I thought it, after all. Only, as I took care to add, if I ever should have a husband he must be diametrically opposed to Hubert: no beard, no spectacles, no fussy humdrum ways! And he certainly should never call me 'my dear'—I should settle that beforehand with him. 'My dear!' Could any two words be more insufferably patronising?

Now it was the very next evening that Harry behaved in the most tiresome fashion. In fact, I was so shocked that I cried about it. We were walking home from church together, and were just sauntering along in a lazy way, because the evening was so beautiful, when he made me turn into a little lane on the pretence of listening to a nightingale, when all at once I found, to my dismay, that he was proposing to me!

If I had not been so angry I must have laughed, for it was too absurd, and yet the poor boy was quite in earnest, and, in spite of his youth, there was a manly dignity about him that checked any propensity to merriment.

'You ought not to be so severe, Miss Leigh,' he said deprecatingly, as I again repeated that I was excessively annoyed. 'Of course you have never encouraged me ; but when a fellow likes a girl, he has a right to tell her so.'

'He has no right—none at all,' I replied hotly, for what would

Hubert say to us? and how unmercifully Jem would have laughed at us both! For though Harry would be tremendously rich one day—he was an only son, and Colonel Vivian was at the tip-top of county society—he was only twenty, and ought to be thinking of his studies, and not making himself miserable about a girl a few months younger than himself. Besides, if I ever married, my husband must be at least ten years older than myself!

‘I hold a different opinion,’ he returned, flushing at my petulance. Poor, dear Harry, how nice and handsome he looked, and how fond I was of him! ‘You are very hard on me, Miss Leigh; as though I can help loving you;’ and then he said a great many pretty things, and would not let me interrupt him until he had finished, and then he said quite humbly: ‘Won’t you give me just a little bit of hope? I am so fond of you, that even a crumb of comfort would be something. If I may speak to you again in a year’s time, or two——’

But I stopped him decidedly.

‘It is no use, I cannot care for you in that way, Harry. I like you; you have always been so nice and kind, and you have given me Rollo; but I will not be so wicked as to give you any hope. We will be friends. Oh yes, we will always be friends, and I shall be so interested in all that concerns you.’

‘I see it is all up with me,’ he returned gloomily; ‘but of course I am not such a cad as to press a girl. If you ever alter your mind’—here I shook my head—‘you must just let me know, for I shall never care for any one else.’ (‘Oh, Harry, what a fib!’) ‘I suppose you would not let me, just for once——’ but as I drew myself up the poor boy blushed and apologised. I took his hand and held it for a moment; there were tears in his eyes, and I was so sorry for him.

‘No, Harry dear,’ I said gravely; ‘how do I know that in the years to come I may not like somebody else better, and then I should feel sorry if I had let any one else kiss me. No, we can be friends without that;’ and then, as he still continued dejected, I talked to him in quite an elder-sisterly way. Harry’s sisters were only school-girls of fourteen and fifteen. I gave him a great deal of excellent advice, to which he listened in a most docile manner; but I am not sure that it benefited him, for as we turned our faces homeward he produced a little packet from his waistcoat pocket, and in a shamefaced manner tendered it for my acceptance.

It was a pretty little brooch, and must have cost a good deal; but I put it back in his hand.

‘You must keep that for Ada or Laura’s birthday,’ I said quietly, and he did not venture to say another word. When we

reached the hall-door I shook hands again with him—this time very solemnly. ‘You poor boy, I must forgive you, I suppose, but you must never do so again,’ and I ran upstairs.

I cried a good deal that night, for I was so sorry to have vexed him; but as I brushed out my hair before the glass, I peeped at myself once or twice rather curiously.

‘So I have actually refused an offer!’ I thought; ‘I wonder if I shall ever have another. Kitty said she never cared for any one until she saw Hubert—that the moment she saw him she had an odd sort of feeling. I rather like that idea; in fairy tales everything is so deliciously sudden: the prince comes riding up; he just throws a glance at the fortunate princess. “I am he,” that is all he says, and he holds out his hand, and they ride away into fairy-land. I shall never have another chance, I know; but, all the same, I should like something out of the common. Jem says I am awfully romantic. “What a goose you are, Olga!” he would say. Well, I am a goose,’ and with this humiliating confession I scrambled into bed.

CHAPTER XI

LA MAISONNETTE

'Oh, the moorland by the sea, where the purple heather groweth,
And the bracken rears its crozier 'midst the mosses and the ling :
Where the brown bee croons its song as it gaily homeward goeth,
And the wheeling sea-bird stoopeth the white wonder of its wing.

'Oh, the incense-breathing firs ! the great firs that skirt the moorland,
Shedding perfume all about it, from soft surging plumes of green,
That with strong protecting arms, leaning inward from the foreland,
Let the tender, warm sea-azure here and there slip in between.'

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

'Do you feel better, Olga?'

'No—yes—I don't know, Aunt Catherine,' I replied, speaking in the smallest of voices, and struggling up into a sitting posture. I am afraid I must have looked a miserable object huddled up in my berth, for Rollo sprang up and licked my hand ; and, in spite of her pity, Aunt Catherine could not forbear a smile.

'Poor child, I am so sorry you have had such a wretched time. The captain owns it was a little fresh, but I was too good a sailor to mind it. Now, Olga, you must drink this cup of tea and try to join me on deck. We are just nearing the quay, and it is such a lovely morning.'

'I will try,' I replied languidly ; 'but please do not wait for me.'

For in my present mood it almost aggravated me to see Aunt Catherine so well and brisk ; she looked as trim and comfortable as though she had slept in her bed at home—not a hair awry, and quite a fresh colour in her face. Indeed, as she took care to inform me, she had slept soundly the first part of the night, and then, finding the cabin close and unbearable, had gone up on deck to watch the daybreak.

A little fresh, that was what they called it ! Never had I

passed such a night in my life ! It had seemed interminable, lying there in misery and discomfort, listening to the labouring engines and the wash of the waves, and seeing nothing but the swinging lamps and the rocking walls of the cabin. Now and then it appeared to me as though the floor were merged into the ceiling. Dim figures seemed to reel through the distant door. Now we seemed to sink with swing-like motion into some deep trough of the waves, and then to rise with an awful regularity and precision. How I longed for my dear little room at Fircroft, for Kitty, for Jem—even Hubert would have been a comfort—to be anywhere out of this suffocating place, which to my giddy, confused senses seemed full of pale, cadaverous faces, and whispering voices grotesque with misery !

It was good of Aunt Catherine to bring me that cup of tea ; but in spite of its restorative effects I still felt so faint that it was with difficulty that I could drag myself from my berth ; and long before I had put the finishing touches to my toilet, the boat stopped, and we could hear the rush of footsteps overhead.

‘Olga, my dear child, what a time you have been !’ and Aunt Catherine looked at my pale face with concern. ‘The luggage is being taken to the Custom House, and we must go ashore at once. Do not look so miserable ; the fresh air will do you a world of good, and you will soon feel all right again.’

And with these cheering words she handed me my hat and gloves, and bade me follow her on deck. The first rush of cool morning air turned me giddy, and I clutched Aunt Catherine’s arm for support. I was dazzled, confused by the sunshine and bustle, the crowding passengers, the sharp volley of speeches. A strange blending of English and French voices seemed to fill the air—gendarmes, drivers of fiacres, and sailors. How strange it all looked ! What a medley of foreign life ! What glow and colouring ! Before us were the gray walls and buildings of St. Genette, the broad quay planted with plane trees, the stream of people and luggage going to the Douane ; behind us the blue sea, with its tossing, crested waves sporting in the sunlight. What a bright scene ! how full of interest to every one except to me !

‘Now, Olga,’ observed Aunt Catherine, in the same brisk voice, ‘you shall sit down on that nice shady seat while I see after our luggage—you are not fit for the bustle of a Douane, and I am perfectly accustomed to manage for myself. No one will interfere with you, you will find plenty of amusement, and Rollo will take care of you ;’ and I gladly took her advice.

The giddiness was passing off now, and I began to feel less miserable ; in a little while I was looking about me with the

keen delight of an inexperienced traveller. Every minute I saw something to attract my attention; now it was a group of watermen in their blue blouses, gesticulating and talking with French vivacity; then a *bonne*, in her white cap, with some oddly-dressed children; a priest, in shovel hat and cassock; a little shrivelled Sister of Mercy, in a white hood and gray habit. A sudden tinkling of bells; a miller's cart slowly rumbles along the quay; the driver in his blue blouse cracks his long whip; the horses are gay with their blue sheepskins and bells—under the bright sunshine everything looks full of colour. Two more priests, one old and gray, the other young and solemn-looking, pass me, reading their breviaries, and an old peasant woman, in a long black cloak, with a basket of onions and carrots, meets them. The old priest lifts his hat with a kindly air. 'Bon jour, Madame Grenier!' he says, with a kindly reverence. The toothless old creature mumbles out something in a shrill voice; she has a brown weazen face, and looks a hundred, at least; some soldiers with blue trousers and red shoulder-knots pass, and point her out to each other; then they laugh and nudge each other, and say something about his reverence and the little mother of the big Pierre. So these are French soldiers, I say to myself; these dapper little figures with odd monkey-like faces, and big pointed moustaches. How they strut along the quay—these fine fellows—as though they could conquer the world! The younger priest has walked on, still absorbed in his breviary; but Madame Grenier talks on in shrill quavering accents, and the old priest listens good-humouredly; she is telling a long story, but it is not easy to understand her dialect—the name Pierre comes in frequently. Has she ever been young, this Madame Grenier? It must be terrible to grow old like that! At this point in my reflections, Aunt Catherine interrupted me.

'I am ready now, Olga,' she said; 'the luggage is on the fiacre; it is rather a long drive to La Maisonnette, but I see you are better.' I noticed that she gave the old priest a searching look as we passed him. 'If it should be Père Lefevre!' she whispered in my ear. Another crack of the whip, and we were off, down a long road that skirted the quay. It was some time before we lost sight of the sea. The lean little horses did their work famously, but presently their speed slackened, as we entered a long narrow street with shops on each side. 'We have left St. Genette, Olga,' explained Aunt Catherine; 'this is really St. Croix. You must see St. Genette properly to-morrow; some of the streets are so quaint. It is such an interesting place—especially to artists. This street is comparatively commonplace,

but the shops are excellent. Look! there is the market, but the stalls are half empty. Do you see that old woman with the gold earrings?’

I was thoroughly interested by this time. After a few minutes we turned into a wide road planted with trees, up and down which some *bonnes* and children were strolling. By and by we came to a large figure of the Christ hanging on the cross. How lonely and pathetic it looked in that wide place! We passed some large houses set in gardens after this; then the road grew more countrified. We drove down lanes with cornfields on one side; strange to say, the cornfields were also orchards. All at once we stopped before a big brown gate shaded by a large sycamore; a barn was on one side. The driver pulled a bell that sounded a hoarse loud peal; the next moment we heard footsteps, and a young woman with an oddly-shaped coif and a droll good-humoured face threw open the gate with voluble welcome.

‘Madame and the young demoiselle were welcome; they must be much fatigued, and must refresh themselves at once. She and Jules would see to the luggage. The horses would take care of themselves. Would madame enter the house?’ in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

We were standing in a wide courtyard. Before us was a good-sized house, plastered with yellowish stucco, with great brown shutters—jalousies, I suppose they call them—to every window. The sun was blazing now, for it was mid-day, so Aunt Catherine was glad to take refuge in the house. The doors all stood open. Rollo, who had preceded us, stood wagging his tail in some perplexity.

‘Out of the way, old fellow. This is the salon, Olga!’ exclaimed Aunt Catherine; and I followed her into a pleasant room, very nicely furnished, and deliciously cool, with one big window looking on the lawn and courtyard, and the other on the garden. I opened the blind and peeped out, and my exclamation brought Aunt Catherine to my side in a moment.

I had never seen such a garden. It was full of big trees, and resembled a miniature wood. At the end was a little grove; a broad gravel walk led to it. On one side was a tiny lawn, on the other a confused pattern of oddly-shaped beds, with paths round them. The whole garden gave one a delightful impression of shady coolness and luxuriant foliage.

‘Very pleasant in summer, but decidedly unwholesome in winter,’ observed Aunt Catherine. ‘No wonder the place did not agree with Mrs. Milner. What a pretty room this is, Olga—is it not? There is Jeanne carrying in our rugs. I suppose the *salle-*

à-manger is opposite. Let us explore. Does it not seem strange, taking possession of the whole house in this fashion. Look at Rollo poking his nose almost everywhere; I am sure he enjoys the fun as much as we do.'

The salle-à-manger was a large bare-looking room, one end lined with cupboards, and with an astonishing number of doors. There was a door into the passage, and a door into a dark, fusty little kitchen, a glass door opening on the courtyard, and another opposite it leading into the garden. A small window by the fireplace gave additional light. A hen and some chickens were clucking on the doorstep in anticipation of a meal, which the white cloth and cups and saucers seemed to warrant.

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, how deliciously cool this room is! but it is far too big for comfort. What a long table just for us two!'

'The coffee is ready, and shall be served,' returned Jeanne, coming in at that moment. 'Perhaps madame would dismiss Jules, and give him his due. She and the demoiselle must be furnished after such a journey. Would mademoiselle prefer a cup of English tea? Madame always took it for her déjeuner. Strong tea with a slice of lemon would be refreshing, or café au lait.'

I pronounced in favour of a cup of English tea; Aunt Catherine chose café au lait. More bustle, and stamping of sabots across the brick floor, then Jeanne marches in triumphantly, bearing a large coffee-pot in one hand and a little brown teapot in the other; a pile of toast follows, then eggs, and some slices of curious-looking meat, a bowl of salad, some plums, a glass jug of cold water. Rollo watched Jeanne's movements attentively. He was a dog of sagacity, and always knew his friends. Jeanne was not handsome; she had a turned-up nose; she wore a singular cap; she talked gibberish; still Rollo decided she was a person to whom he might show respect. In proof of this he sat up before her solemnly and tendered her a paw—a signal that he was growing hungry.

Jeanne uttered a faint shriek, and wrapped her hands in her apron; she pronounced him *un bête effroyable*—he was ill-conditioned, terrible, a monster to be feared; regardless of all these compliments, Rollo still sat and proffered his paw in the most friendly fashion.

Jeanne giggled and fairly fled to her kitchen, and we could hear her high-pitched voice out in the courtyard.

'Mrs. Milner says Jeanne is an excellent servant,' observed Aunt Catherine, as she poured out my tea; 'she is a most faithful creature. I wish you did not look so pale, Olga, but tea and

toast will just suit you. I did not make a bad breakfast on board, but I mean to try some of that stuffed veal. You must lie down and get a nap, while I unpack and write to Virginia.'

I was glad to take this advice presently. There was only one good-sized bedroom, which I at once decided must be for Aunt Catherine. The other rooms were rather small and barely furnished; an uncarpeted passage led to them. After a few moments' hesitation, I chose a long, narrow room next to Aunt Catherine's; it was furnished with the utmost simplicity—a little French bedstead in one corner, a painted washstand and chest of drawers, with an oval glass in a black frame hanging over it. There was a door of communication with a still smaller room; a chintz curtain hung over it. The floor was polished, and a little strip of carpet was beside the bed. The window was wide open: down below was the shady garden, with the little grove, looking more like some woodland glade in its depth of delicious coolness; it was so strangely silent, too—only the humming of bees, as they hovered over the quaint flower-beds, broke the stillness, or the occasional click of Jeanne's sabots across the courtyard. Aunt Catherine came in and closed the great brown shutters for me; then she shook up the snowy pillow, and left me to my siesta. It was late in the afternoon when I was awakened by Rollo laying his big black paw on my arm; he looked in my face with a whine, as though remonstrating with me on my unusual laziness. Jeanne was standing by me with a little tray with a cup of coffee and some crisp-looking cracknels on a white-fringed napkin; she deposited it on the bed, and then, putting her hands on her hips, regarded me with a benevolent grin.

'La jeune demoiselle had slept well—bien! The great dog, Monsieur Rollo—was not that his name?—had been contemplating the door for hours; he had been triste, inconsolable, without his mistress. Where was madame? she had gone to recruit herself with a walk—she was a person of energy. She had left word that the jeune demoiselle—Meess—Meess Olga—oh, the droll little name!—should repose herself: the day was long enough for amusement. Would it be possible to assist mademoiselle? no—then she, Jeanne, would return to her devoirs; there was water to draw from the well, and she must fetch eggs and butter from the farm. Would the young English Meess be afraid to be left in the house with the big dog, Monsieur Rollo?'

I dismissed Jeanne with the assurance that I should not be afraid, and then jumped up and unpacked with the utmost despatch, while Rollo lay with his nose between his paws and watched me. When I had finished I took my hat and went out

in the passage; the open window tempted me, and I stood for some minutes looking out on the courtyard and barn and the brown gate shaded by the huge sycamore. How still and peaceful it looked in the evening light! I felt as though I were in some enchanted place; it was all so strange and unhome-like, as though I were dreaming, and must wake up presently and find myself back at Fircroft. Jeanne must have gone to the farm; I peeped into the empty kitchen, where only a black kitten was warming herself beside the closed stove, and then went out into the garden. I directed my steps involuntarily to the little grove; there were some wicker chairs and a table, and a hammock swinging between two trees; a little gate led into a kitchen-garden full of fruit-trees. A sort of curiosity induced me to unlatch the gate and walk down the narrow, grass-grown path; there seemed a sort of building at the end that looked like a stable or a barn, I could not guess which; a dilapidated flight of steps led to the upper story—was it inhabited? for there was a white curtain fluttering at an open window—the next instant I caught sight of a dark masculine profile, and turned hastily away. Perhaps, after all, it was a barn, and that was the farmer himself. I was intruding—most likely the kitchen garden belonged to the farm and not to La Maisonnette. I was glad to close the gate behind me, and to find myself in our own garden.

I wondered where Aunt Catherine had gone, and as I heard Jeanne's sabots in the distance, I determined to go a little way down the lane; but as I opened the gate I found her standing outside; she had her old brown garden-hat on.

'I was just wishing for you, Olga,' she said brightly. 'I wanted to show you the extensive domains that belong to our landlord. I have been talking to him—his name is Monsieur Perrot, and he lives at the farm close by. He seems an honest old fellow. That lane leads right down to the bay; but I want to show you the view from the cliff first. We may regard this as our private grounds—so Monsieur Perrot tells me. No one but his lodger ever comes here, so we shall be quite undisturbed.'

So saying, she opened a little gate, and we found ourselves in a cornfield full of apple trees. Then we came to a green place with some beautiful fir trees, overlooking the lane. Across the road were the grounds of a château, with a small lake surrounded by trees, and a boat moored to the bank. The water had a strange greenish hue, from the filtering of sunshine through leaves; it had a solitary, deserted look, as though no human footstep ever broke the stillness, or trod on the grassy paths.

'That is the Château de Clairville,' observed Aunt Catherine. 'It belongs to the Delaincourts, but they are in Paris at present. Mrs. Milner told me a sad story about them once. The eldest son, then a fine boy of eleven or twelve, was drowned in that very lake. A schoolfellow upset the boat, and Gaston could not swim. They say none of the family have ever looked at the lake since. It is probably the truth, for the boat seems falling to pieces through age and disuse. Madame Delaincourt has taken a dislike to the château, and they live most of the year in Paris.'

'It looks like the scene of a tragedy,' I returned, with a shudder. 'How weird and uncanny it must look by moonlight. Let us go and—— Why, there is actually heather! What a pretty, wild place!'

'Yes, is it not? This is the cliff: and if we follow this little winding path, we shall come to the steps that lead down to the bathing-house. Is this not curious, Olga—this mingling of corn-fields, orchards, fir trees, and heather-covered cliffs? Now you can see the bay—what do you think of that?'

I was silent from sheer admiration of the beautiful scene before me. Below us lay the yellow sands, with piles of amber-coloured seaweed, and beyond, the blue waters of the bay, shimmering in the golden sunlight, and studded with rocky islets; across the bay wooded promontories, and the white gleam of buildings from the gay little seaport town of Nanterre; while to our left were the picturesque banks that skirted the river Lière—cliffs, sands, and the red and white sails of numberless boats, all steeped in the pure radiant light of early evening.

'Aunt Catherine, this is paradise!'

'An earthly paradise; but you are right—it is very beautiful. The sunsets are wonderful here; indeed, the glow of colouring is peculiarly foreign. I have seen the bay as intensely blue as the Mediterranean. Look to your right, Olga: that is the fashionable bathing-place of St. Croix, and across those cliffs there are the cemetery and the Hospital de St. Pierre. We shall pass both on our way to the English Church. Farther on is St. Genette, and those massive towers belong to St. Dominique—that is where they kept the English prisoners. When we cross to Nanterre, we shall have to start from St. Dominique—it is only twenty minutes across the bay.'

I listened to Aunt Catherine with interest and tried to follow her outstretched finger, as she pointed out one object after another; but I could only give a divided attention. My own senses seemed steeped in beauty. We were on the farthest point of the cliff; no one was in sight; the only signs of human life were the little boats

rocking in the sunlight. One could dimly discern a red or blue cap belonging to some fisherman. We were seated on the heather, and the long slow wash of the waves was the only sound that reached our ears: except, once, the distant clanging of a bell on the cliff.

'Are you cold? Why do you shiver, Olga? There is scarcely a breath of air; it has been a hot day, so Monsieur Perrot tells me.'

'No, I am not cold.'

But in spite of my words another irrepressible shiver passed through me. I had a strange indescribable sensation as though something were going to happen, as though some subtle spirit of change stood by me to interpret the future. Why had I come there? Would it not have been better for me to have remained at home? Something to this effect seemed to pass through my mind with a strange nervous accompaniment of dread. I had never experienced such a feeling before.

'Are you sure there is nothing the matter, Olga?'

'No; but I believe I am tired,' and I stood up and stretched myself a little wearily.

'Let us go back to the house, then,' returned Aunt Catherine kindly. 'Jeanne will have prepared our supper by this time, and when you have had it you shall go to bed. Come, child, come!'

But I followed her unwillingly. Once I looked back; the sky was tinged with a rosy hue; the bay was transfigured; the little fleet of fishing smacks looked like fairy boats; the opposite shore was bathed in the glow of the setting sun.

'I am glad I have come across the seas to look at this,' I said to myself; and then aloud, 'Aunt Catherine, we must always come here in the evening. I shall christen this lovely spot "Sefton Point."'

CHAPTER XII

A MIDDLE-AGED ROMANCE

'Thou goest,' she said, 'and ne'er again
Must we two meet in joy or pain.'

Bridal of Triermain.

'They part,
Each with a grieved and anxious heart.'

BERKELEY.

A NIGHT of sound sleep perfectly restored me. When we met at breakfast, Aunt Catherine declared herself to be quite satisfied with my looks. It was a lovely morning; the air felt light and buoyant, the spacious *salle-à-manger* looked cool and bare as I entered it. There was a pleasant flicker of green leaves against the glass door that led into the courtyard. A faint breeze stirred the huge branches of the sycamore. Rollo lay stretched out on the stone step watching a hen and her chickens scratching in the dust. A fragrant smell of coffee came from the kitchen. A great pile of brown toast was on the table. Aunt Catherine came in from the garden with a bunch of roses with the dew still on them.

'Have you slept well, my dear? but I need not ask, you look as bright as the morning itself. Now I shall venture to propose a little plan for the morning. We will take a *fiacre* and drive down to St. Genette; it is too hot to walk all that distance. After we have looked about us a little, we will go to St. Sulpice. You will not mind my leaving you alone for a little while, Olga, while I call on Monsieur Lefevre?'

'You are going this morning?' in some surprise.

Aunt Catherine smiled.

'Procrastination was never one of my faults. What is the use of putting off for to-morrow the duty that belongs to to-day? I

am too good a business-woman to cheat my conscience in that way. I have come all this distance to see Père Lefevre, and I do not mean to lose a moment before I call on him. We must think of poor Virginia.'

'Yes, of course.'

But I was a little sorry that Aunt Catherine would not give up one day to pure enjoyment; it was such a delicious morning. I should have liked to have spent it on the sands, or on Sefton Point; but I would not have told her so for worlds.

An hour afterwards we were driving towards St. Genette, and my brief discontent was soon forgotten at the sight of the beautiful old town, with its narrow picturesque streets, and its quaint houses with their peaked roofs and overhanging eaves and wide casements, over which towered the steeple of St. Sulpice. I felt as though I were transported back to mediæval days, as though I had seen those old streets in some dream of the past. What colouring, what harmony of tints in the soft grays and yellows, the dull red roofs, the narrow breadth of sky above, so deeply, intensely blue, the clear sunshine! And then the gay medley of passers-by—white-capped bonnes, soldiers in red and blue, sisters of charity in their hoods and gray and black habits, sombre-looking priests, peasant women with massive silver earrings reposing against their brown shrivelled cheeks, and little black bead-like eyes roving everywhere. From end to end of the quaint old town we drove, and every moment we came upon some picturesque group, some combination of effect and colouring to excite our admiration. Now it was some snow-white pigeons settling on a red-peaked roof, now a heavy cart with gray horses ambling along under their gay adornment of blue sheepskin and bells, then a donkey with pannier, a dark-eyed girl with gold earrings walking beside it, a brown-faced baby in a close cap peeping out of each pannier.

All at once we left the narrow streets behind and crossed a place with sycamores and seats under them. Some soldiers were drinking and smoking under the awning of a restaurant. A band was playing in the distance, some children were dancing, while their bonnes chatted and knitted on the benches. A quick turn, and I uttered an exclamation of delight: before us was the open sea. The waves were rolling in upon the shore; the sun was shining, there was a great stretch of yellow sands: gay little cabanes of blue and white striped canvas seemed dotted about everywhere; oddly-dressed figures emerged from them, and ran with little ripples of laughter into the sea. The children were wading knee-deep in the pools; ladies were working, gossiping, watching the bathers: the band was playing dance music; there

were coloured minstrels, conjurers, an old man with an organ and a melancholy-eyed monkey. The old man played a dreary tune, the monkey jumped and clutched its little red cap. Some soldiers were watching it. Everywhere life, movement, children's voices, laughter, and the yellow sunshine pouring down on the gray old buildings and rocky island, and on the happy human groups. I could have stayed there for hours ; but Jules had his orders, and after a few minutes he had cracked his whip again, and the lean little horses were carrying us back into the narrow streets. We were descending a somewhat steep one. The houses were poorer and more crowded. In another moment we were at the door of St. Sulpice.

What a change from the busy streets to the dark scented stillness within. An old peasant woman was hobbling in before us. She took some holy water and crossed herself, and looked at us rebukingly as we passed her.

How vast and mysterious it all looked—the lamps swinging before the high altar, the stacks of empty chairs, the side chapels and shrines, with dark figures kneeling here and there, the strange, penetrating perfume of incense.

'I will leave you now, Olga,' whispered Aunt Catherine ; 'there is much that will interest you. You can go round and look at everything ; no one will disturb you.'

I felt as though I were in some dream as I heard the great door close after her. The utter stillness, the gleam from the different shrines, seemed to wrap me round with mystery. Everywhere was repeated the same solemn story—here the Madonna and the calm-eyed Babe, there the Mater Dolorosa and the Divine Sufferer on the cross—simple, majestic, uncomplaining ; in all ages a spectacle to men and angels.

I grew weary of wandering about presently, and seated myself before a little chapel, with an image of a grave, benevolent St. Joseph, and the Holy Child beside him. An old fisherman was kneeling before it ; his gray head was bowed in his hands. A little farther off was the old peasant woman who had preceded us, and a lady with a long black veil. Now and then some noiseless figure glided from behind the high altar and knelt down silently. The hushed fragrant atmosphere seemed full of those noiseless prayers.

'It is good to be here,' I thought ; 'here thousands of worshippers, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, have brought their cares and sorrows, their penitential petitions, their praises, to the throne of Divine Grace. In England the churches are empty, swept and garnished for the Sunday services. No sons and daughters of toil

ever creep into those spotless edifices on week-days to offer up a prayer, a thanksgiving for some blessing received. Are the poor of St. Genette more pious? Whose fault is it that our churches are not homes for our working people?’

I was so absorbed by these reflections that Aunt Catherine's return quite startled me. I had not expected her so soon. She looked pale and weary, and as soon as we were outside she said with a sigh:

‘We shall have to be patient, Olga. I encountered an unexpected difficulty. Monsieur Lefevre left St. Croix this morning. He has been summoned to a brother's deathbed, and is not expected back for a week or two. I saw his old housekeeper, but she could give me no information. Her master was a holy man, she said, and was always attending the sick and dying. He never spared himself if his people needed him. Some of the other Fathers knew how to save themselves trouble, but not Père Lefevre.’

‘Oh, Aunt Catherine, what a disappointment!’

‘Yes, it is very trying. Virginia will be so cast down by the delay. If I thought it would be any good, I would follow him to Paris; but how can one intrude at such a time? He will come back, she says, as soon as his brother is buried; and I fear we must wait for that.’

But though Aunt Catherine said no more, I could see that she was much troubled.

We were tired with our busy morning, so, after dinner, Aunt Catherine proposed that we should take our books and walk to the little grove, as I persisted in calling it.

‘Jeanne says it is always cool there on the hottest days; and she has promised to bring us some coffee presently. In the evening we can stroll to your favourite point.’

As I approved of this plan, we were soon comfortably ensconced, Aunt Catherine in an old-fashioned armchair, and I in the hammock. We were both indisposed for conversation at first—Aunt Catherine had a book, and I was content to lie in the hammock and listen to the birds twittering among the leaves over my head, and think of Jem—it was so pleasant and peaceful. As I swung to and fro, I could see the little grass-grown path I had explored yesterday, between the apple trees. Some one was walking among the cabbages, for I could catch sight of a blue blouse in the distance. The sun was blazing on the yellow stucco walls of the house; the brown shutters were closed. Jeanne was going to and fro between the well and the courtyard—I could hear her shrill voice speaking to some one; the black kitten was chasing a white butterfly across

the lawn, springing up into the air and then suddenly wheeling round in pursuit of its own tail ; a great brown bee settled on a rose-bush close to us. 'What a beautiful world this is,' I thought as I floated off into a day-dream.

Aunt Catherine read steadily all the afternoon, but I noticed that now and then a sigh escaped her ; but she did not talk freely until we had taken our coffee, and were sauntering towards the cliff. When we had seated ourselves, and had exhausted our rapturous exclamations at the beauty of the evening and of the bay below us, she said rather suddenly :—

'Olga, you do not know how I have set my heart on finding Basil.'

I had been watching some barefooted boys, with closely-cropped heads and ragged trousers, who were collecting seaweed on the shore, but as she spoke, I looked up in some surprise.

'I shall be bitterly disappointed if we fail to discover any traces of him. I hope I am not too sanguine, but I am hoping for great results from my interview with Père Lefevre. Surely Paul Lyndhurst will have spoken of his son on his deathbed.'

'If—if he be still alive,' I replied ; but Aunt Catherine looked a little distressed at my remark.

'Who put that doubt in your head, Olga ? Why should not Basil be alive ? Virginia always says he was a strong, healthy child. It would be a cruel disappointment to me as well as to his mother, if your supposition were true. If Basil be dead, we have no heir.'

I was silent, for just then Hubert's foolish speech came into my head. I felt myself colour with annoyance. That was the worst of hearing such speeches, they could not be forgotten. But Aunt Catherine did not notice my slight embarrassment ; she was following out her own line of thought.

'It is so sad that we have no one belonging to us—no one to take interest in the place, and to cherish us in our old age. Virginia's son would have been so dear to me. I should have been as proud of him as though I had been his mother. Sometimes I look at Jem—we are both very fond of him—but he is not a Sefton : our blood does not flow in his veins—he is not one of us.'

'I see what you mean, Aunt Catherine.'

'It is our own that we want—our own flesh and blood. If I could only find Basil, and say to him, "I am your mother's sister, but you shall be like my own son ; come home with me, and I will show you your mother. If you will be patient and not mind the society of two homely women, we will teach you the old traditions, the family histories. You shall know your ancestors by name, you

shall be one of us." This is what I am' always saying to the imaginary Basil; and,' with a little smile, 'he always puts his hand in mine, and says frankly, "I will go home with you."'

I had never heard Aunt Catherine speak like this before. There was a yearning sound in her voice, and a misty look in her gray eyes that spoke of unfulfilled longing.

'If you had only married!' I exclaimed involuntarily.

She started, and a faint blush came to her cheek.

'You mean, if I had married I might have had a son of my own—perhaps sons and daughters, who knows? That is what one misses when one grows old. That is why I think so much of Basil, because I have no one else belonging to me.'

'But, Aunt Catherine,'—hesitating, for I feared to displease her—'surely you could have married over and over again if you had liked?'

'One only wants to marry once, Olga,' smiling as though my speech amused her. 'After all, there is only one man a woman can bring herself to marry.'

'Whom do you mean?' in some perplexity.

'I mean, of course, the man she loves. Does not that go without saying?'

'Yes, of course; but—no, you will think me impertinent. I will not ask such a question.'

'Your eyes ask it instead. Yes, there was some one whom I could have married.'

'And for whose sake you have remained single—oh, Aunt Catherine!'

'You question rather closely, little one; but never mind, it is a very old story; it does not give me pain now. When I was your age, Olga, I was thrown almost daily into the society of some one who seemed to me better and nobler than any one else. I never knew any one so absolutely true. He reminded me of Nathaniel, for he was without guile. Young as I was, I soon understood that he had a higher standard of right and wrong than most men.'

'Will you tell me a little more about him?' creeping closer to her as I spoke, for there was a shadow on the dear face.

'Do you not think it is rather foolish of a middle-aged woman to tell her love-story to a girl? Well, if you will hear it—— But there is nothing much to tell. Other women would have forgotten it long ago—would have loved again, and have married; but it was never possible to me.'

'Did you care for him so much?'

'How could I help it, knowing what he was? And then he was so good to me. I should have grown up frivolous and

pleasure-loving but for him. Everything I have I owe to him. It is strange to think that any one so young should have had such an influence. He was not so many years older than I was. He was only in deacon's orders when he first came to Brookfield.'

'I had no idea he was a clergyman. Do you mind telling me his name, and—and was he very attractive-looking?'

Aunt Catherine smiled at the feminine question.

'That is so like a girl, Olga! His name is Robert Fleming. No, he was not handsome; on the contrary, he was plain—but it was a face one could trust at once. I used to think it beautiful when he was preaching. My father was always hospitable to the clergy. Mr. Fleming used to dine at the Hall once or twice a week. He was a clever and amusing companion, and his conversation was always agreeable to my father. After a time he volunteered to teach me Latin and botany, and then we were always together. Was it any wonder, then, that we grew to care too much for each other? Surely the blame was not ours? I can only marvel at the blindness of my father and Virginia; but no one suspected anything until too late. I think that year was the happiest of my life. Every day brought new pleasure. I never asked myself the reason why I took life so joyously. I was young, and the world was very beautiful, and Robert was good to me.

'But one day the revelation came. In an unguarded moment, when we were alone, the truth came out. Robert loved me too much for his own peace of mind; either he must leave Brookfield, or I must give him hope that his feelings were returned. I do not need to tell you, Olga, that my whole heart belonged to him. I owned my affection frankly, and for one day at least we were happy.

'I remember that night I could hardly sleep for joy. I lay hour after hour recalling his looks and words. I seemed to ask no more of life than Robert's love, and to feel that we belonged to each other. But my happiness was short-lived. When I saw him again he looked worn and harassed. To my dismay I found that he was blaming himself severely for his imprudent confession. "Your father will have a right to reproach me for my dishonourable conduct, Catherine," he said sorrowfully. "I ought not to have betrayed my feelings. There is only one course open to me. As a gentleman, I must at once acquaint him with what has happened." And in spite of my entreaties and tears—for I feared to lose him—he sought at once an interview with my father.

'I need not tell you the result: my father was bitterly angry with us both; Robert was forbidden the house, and I was re-

proved most harshly and cruelly for my undignified behaviour in encouraging a poor curate. In vain I protested that I loved him dearly, that I would never marry any man but Robert Fleming. My father simply refused to hear a word. We were ordered to pack up at once and leave the Hall—we were to go abroad, and remain there as long as Robert was at Brookfield. Olga, it was only through Virginia's connivance that I bade Robert good-bye. It was a bitterly sad parting: neither of us had any hope.

"I am a poor man, Catherine," he said to me; "my people are comparatively humble folk. I have no interest, I cannot expect success in this life—I shall never be able to win you—the prize is not for me—I am justly punished for having dared to love you." And those were almost his last words to me.'

'Do you mean you have never seen him since?'

'Never, Olga, except at a distance. Robert Fleming and I parted that summer morning for ever in this world. We went to Rome, and before our return he had left Brookfield; and the only thing I heard was, that he had been ill, and that an uncle had taken him abroad. If we suffered, my poor father had his punishment too. To save me from marrying the best man in the world, he took us to the place where poor Virginia met her wretched husband. But for this she might have been a happy woman now.'

'And you have never heard of him?'

'Not until my father's death, a good many years afterwards, and then a casual acquaintance we met at some watering-place mentioned his name. He had a curacy at Leeds, and was working in a very poor parish. She told me the name of his church, and a year or two afterwards, when I was within a few miles of the place, I went one evening in the hope of hearing him preach.'

'Did you really? Oh, Aunt Catherine, but did he not recognise you?'

'He could not, for I had a thick veil, and sat at the end of the church. But I could see him distinctly; he looked older and thinner, and stooped a good deal, but it was the same good, kind face. And his sermon was beautiful; it strengthened me for a long time.'

'But why—why has he never come to you? Is he married?'

'No, he has never married, but that is all I know about him. I have never expected him to come. He is still a curate, and I am a rich woman, and belong to a county family, besides. How can I tell? he may have forgotten me—a man is different from a woman.'

'But you have many friends—grand, influential ones; could you not have helped him secretly to a better position?'

'What a little plotter you are, Olga. How do you know that I have not tried? More than one living has been offered to Mr. Fleming—comfortable country livings; but he cannot be persuaded to leave his curacy. They say he is doing a great work there, a very great work.'

'Why do you look like that, Aunt Catherine? you are keeping something back.'

'Oh, it is nothing,' she said, with her pretty middle-aged blush; 'only I like to think I help him in that work. From time to time the curate of St. Mark's receives a sum of money from one who signs herself, "The Friend of the Poor." He has never seen the handwriting—the world is full of these shy philanthropists. Of course, he takes the money and is thankful, and asks no questions.'

'Dear—dear Aunt Catherine, that is so like you.'

'But it is not like me to romance after this fashion; you are a little witch, Olga, to coax this story from me. Shall we call it the Old Maid's Secret?'

'Don't call yourself names; you are as nice now as you ever have been. Jem and I have always admired you so; you are not a bit old—there is not a gray hair on your head.'

'I will show you hundreds to-morrow. Come, do not let us talk so foolishly. I am old-fashioned enough to believe in Providence—what is, is best. One day, when our work is done, Robert Fleming and I shall meet again. I can wait happily till then.'

'And this is why you have never married?'

'Well, you would not have me content with the second best?—there was only one Robert Fleming. Now, never let us speak of this again. Let me give you one piece of advice—you are young enough to need it: make greater allowances for the so-called old maids; poor things, they are often dull and uninteresting, and have odd, fussy ways, but you do not know what trouble and pain may be in their past. Many of them have young and faithful hearts in spite of their wrinkles. There, I have preached my little sermon,' and as Aunt Catherine said this she rose from her seat, and we went back under the firs and across the cornfield to La Maisonnette.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PAVILION IN THE GARDEN

'Then saunter down the terrace, where the sea,
All fair with wing-like sails, you may discern ;
Be glad, and say, "This beauty is for me—
A thing to love and learn."'

JEAN INGELOW.

THE next few days passed pleasantly. Aunt Catherine was a delightful companion. With her usual unselfishness she put her own cares and anxieties aside, and only thought how she could add to my enjoyment. The weather was lovely ; every morning the bright sunshine woke me ; and as I begrudged each moment spent indoors, we were out from morning to evening. As soon as our early breakfast was over, and Aunt Catherine had settled down to write business letters, or talk over housekeeping matters with Jeanne, I used to put on my broad-brimmed hat and go down to the shore, accompanied by my faithful Rollo. A steep little lane, with arching trees overhead, and a high, fern-covered bank on one side, led down to the bay. The wall of the Château de Clairville was on the other side ; in the distance one could see the blue waters of the bay. A little farther on was a pool, where the women washed their clothes. Often I came upon a little group chattering and laughing as they beat out the linen on the stones. A rugged path led up the cliff to St. Croix. On Sunday we walked to the little English church, and passed the tiny cemetery and the hospital. As we returned that evening a glorious sunset was flushing the bay, and we stood for a long time looking at the lovely scene. Below us was the quiet cemetery, with its black wooden crosses and wreaths of immortelles, and beyond lay the gleaming golden waters. The sun was just sinking in a mass of crimson clouds ; the western sky seemed lit with strange radi-

ance ; the marvellous tints melted and glided into each other with prismatic brilliancy ; the deep-red sail of a fishing-boat seemed to float between earth and sky ; then came a snow-white one ; an indescribable hush and stillness seemed to brood over the scene, as though some holy watcher stood above the quiet dead. A little beyond was the hospital ; before it lay a green enclosure with grass and trees, overlooking the bay. As we walked slowly past, we could see a group of sisters in their gray habits and white hoods sitting under the trees. One of the sisters was reading aloud ; as we paused a moment, a tall, dark-eyed sister, with a beautiful face and the step of a queen, crossed the road and looked at us. The clear, kindly eyes lingered long in my memory.

'Aunt Catherine,' I said softly, as we went down the cliff, 'did you see that sister's face ? She looked like a St. Cecilia.'

'I saw a very handsome nun,' replied Aunt Catherine dryly ; 'depend upon it, she is quite human. Well, they are all good women, though not perhaps as grown-up as we are—but that is the fault of the system ; still, theirs are noble lives, Olga, spent in ministering to the sick bodies and souls of their brothers and sisters. One might well envy them their usefulness.'

But for once I found Aunt Catherine's middle-aged philosophy damping—the inspired face and queenly gait of the grand-looking sister haunted me. I could fancy that face bending over the sick and dying, the pure saintly lips murmuring consoling prayers. How worldly and unsatisfactory one's life looked beside hers ! how petty one's aims and pleasures ! I looked back more than once at that quiet scene, the little band of hard-working women resting in the sunset, the one solitary voice breaking the stillness.

'I can read your thoughts, Olga,' observed Aunt Catherine quietly ; 'you are envying those good sisters yonder ; your young enthusiasm is casting a glamour over them, as usual. My dear, under those gray habits there beat very faulty human hearts ; they do not find it easier to be good than you or I ; they are just brave, unselfish women, who have given up their lives to Christ and His poor, but they have their daily sinkings of heart, their discouragements, as much as you or I ; their little world, bounded by those walls, is not more free from temptation than our wider one.'

'Yes, I know ; but, still, it seems so peaceful and beautiful ; and then that face !'

'St. Cecilia's, you mean ? I wonder if Jeanne can tell us anything about her ; perhaps, after all, she is not more of a saint than that little shrivelled-up sister we saw on the cliff just now ; in this world, alas ! beauty and holiness are not synonymous terms.'

But I was not to be convinced, and from that day I never

passed the Hospital de St. Pierre without watching for the dark-eyed sister.

Our mornings were always spent on the shore — Aunt Catherine would join me when her business was finished ; and we would choose a seat under the shelter of the rocks and watch the bathers and the children building their sand-castles. If the afternoons were hot we always sat in the little grove, but now and then we drove into the country. Once Jules drove us to the little village of Lorette. We seemed to go on for miles, down long endless roads, past cornfields, orchards ; then through one or two scattered hamlets. Now and then there were wider views, glimpses of the river, an expanse of country opening out before us ; then the road seemed to close in again, and we would pass a solitary château.

All at once we stopped, and Jules assisted us to alight. We were in a tiny village ; in the middle of the street was a life-sized figure of the Christ ; an old woman was spinning in a doorway ; a group of handsome peasant girls, with snowy caps and long earrings, were chatting and laughing outside the little brown auberge ; a woman was carrying a green cruche to the well : as we looked down, we could see ferns growing out of the side. Just opposite was a gray church ; another figure of the Christ was in the churchyard. As we entered the humble edifice we could see one or two women kneeling ; a young priest was just leaving the altar ; there was the usual smell of incense.

‘Is not this an ideal village, Olga?’ observed Aunt Catherine. ‘I remember visiting it years ago—the women were threshing corn in the streets, the place seemed piled up with yellow straw ; they were chanting some hymn to the Virgin ; that old woman was spinning in her door then. Now we have a long drive back, and must not loiter, especially as Jules has taken enough cider.’

And she was right ; it was dark before we stopped at the big brown gate—Jeanne could not see our faces as she threw open the door.

‘Madame was late,’ she said in her shrill tones ; ‘it was Monsieur Rollo’s voice that she heard first : “Open to your friends, my good Jeanne,” that was what he said ; ma foi ! he was a dog of sagacity—of intelligence. La demoiselle must be tired above everything. Ah well, she (Jeanne) had lighted the lamp, and the little supper was all ready.’

Jeanne’s little suppers were always very tempting after one of these expeditions ; the big coffee-pot always graced the board, and the bowl of salad. The white china lamp made an oasis of light in the great bare room ; the glass door stood open ; gray moths

dashed in from the darkness, bent on speedy destruction; in the stillness we could hear the faint sighing of the trees.

When supper was over, we betook ourselves to the snug salon; there were always letters to write—to Jem, to Kitty, even a note to Hubert. We could hear Jeanne moving about, washing up dishes and talking to Rollo; by and by there would be the quick slamming of doors and shooting of bolts.

‘How strange it is,’ I said once, looking up from my book, ‘Fircroft and the Hall seem so far away! I don’t feel as though I shall ever want to go back. I should like to go on living as we are for years—just you and I, and Rollo.’

‘And without Jem? Is the dearly-loved brother so soon forgotten?’

‘Jem would come and see us sometimes. He is not always at Fircroft, you know. When he has left Oxford he will have to live in London. We talk of that sometimes, and wonder if Hubert will let me join him there. Jem and I have always planned to live together.’

‘You would leave us all, Olga?’

‘Not willingly; but if Jem wanted me I would go. I do not like to think of him alone in London. Jem ought to be my first consideration; we are everything to each other. Hubert has Kitty and the children. I am not needed at Fircroft; that is what I have always felt.’

‘I should miss you very much!’

‘Not more than I should miss you; but Jem will have two more years at Oxford; besides, by that time, you may have Basil. When Basil comes, Jem and I may not be needed.’

‘Is that how you judge of my friendship, Olga?’

‘No, indeed!’

But I kissed her with a feeling of remorse; for I was afraid that deep down in my heart there was latent jealousy of this Basil. If he should ever take possession of the Hall, Jem and I would be outsiders. ‘It is our own that we want—our own flesh and blood,’ that was what Aunt Catherine had said. It was Basil, not Jem, not this foolish child Olga, who must be taught the family traditions, who must be instructed in the old historic lore. Lady Gwendoline and a score of dead and buried Seftons were to be introduced to Basil as his rightful ancestors. I was only a poor little girl whom the ladies had adopted out of sheer kindness. Well, it was just, but it was a little hard; for would this Basil, this stranger with his foreign education, his un-English habits, ever love Aunt Catherine as Jem and I loved her!

‘And so you would like this odd life of ours to go on for years?’

asked Aunt Catherine with a smile of amusement; 'and what would become of the Hall, and the estate, and Virginia, and my poor people, you unpractical young person?'

'I am not thinking of details,' I returned loftily; 'at present I want things to go on in the same way—to spend endless mornings on the shore, to wander along the cliffs in the evening, to drive down to St. Genette, to make excursions, to drink coffee under the trees. The air is like champagne; it seems to get into my head. I long to run about with the children on the sands. When I bathe I feel like a water-nymph splashing with her companions. I feel so young, and so strong, and so happy, happier than I have ever felt in my life, Aunt Catherine.'

Aunt Catherine looked at me attentively.

'I never saw you look so well, certainly. You look like a wild-rose, Olga—sweet and fresh, but full of little thorns, too; it does me good only to look at you. Come, shall I plan another expedition? Shall we go down the river in the steamer and spend a few hours at Chabert, dine at a restaurant, and look over the town? We shall be back by ten.'

'Delightful! let us go to-morrow.'

'What an impetuous child! You remind me of the old French proverb, "*Un 'tiens' vaut mieux que deux 'tu l'aurais'*;" in plain English, "One 'holdfast' is better than two 'thou shalt have it,'" or, as we generally say, "A bird in the hand is worth two in a bush." Well, well, we will go to-morrow.'

And that was how Aunt Catherine spoilt me.

The clergyman and his wife had called on us a few days after we arrived, but with this exception we had no visitors. Some of the English people looked at us curiously when we went down to the bathing-place, but we kept entirely to ourselves.

One evening I was lying in the hammock; we had been at St. Genette all the afternoon, and we were both tired. Aunt Catherine was resting on the couch in the salon; but the air of the house stifled me, and I preferred swinging under the dark trees, and watching the eerie dusk creep over the garden-paths. A little crescent of a moon hung in the dark summer sky, and one or two stars peeped out over the house.

A cool, delicious air stirred the leaves above me, and fanned my temples refreshingly. I was thinking of Jem; wondering what he thought of my long letters, full of descriptions, and half afraid they would be put into his pocket half read, when a low growl from Rollo disturbed me, and a moment after a tall, dark figure emerged from a clump of gooseberry-bushes in the kitchen-garden and walked rapidly down the little path. It had been impossible in the dark-

ness to distinguish any features ; but as I raised myself in the hammock I judged by the free, swinging gait that the intruder must be young. The light, springy step certainly did not belong to Monsieur Perrot, who was old and fat, and had a stubbly gray beard. The incident was a little disturbing, and, in spite of the cheerful light from Jeanne's unshuttered window, I felt unwilling to remain under the dark trees.

I had a disagreeable impression that the little gate close to me might be suddenly unlatched ; that even now a face might be peering at me through the bushes. Rollo was still sniffing about uneasily. I called him quickly, and sprang from the hammock, but as soon as I was in the house I began to laugh at my own cowardice.

'You were startled, Olga,' observed Aunt Catherine soothingly, 'and it is so dark under those trees. I should have felt the same myself. Most likely it was Monsieur Perrot's lodger. You know, he told me he had a lodger ; it may be a young man, for all we know, though I was foolish enough to make up my mind the lodger was a lady.'

'But what was he doing so late in the kitchen-garden ? Monsieur Perrot's house is some way from here.'

This seemed to pose Aunt Catherine.

'I am sure I do not know,' she said, much amused at my earnestness ; 'but we do not want any mysterious young men suddenly emerging from gooseberry-bushes. Monsieur Perrot is away just now ; on his return I will question him about his lodger. Wait a moment, though, I have an idea ; Monsieur Perrot mentioned the pavilion once—that is the little barn-like building at the end of the garden. Most likely he is an artist, and uses the pavilion as a studio. Yes, this is no doubt the truth. So, after all, it was only a harmless artist smoking his pipe among the cabbages.'

'Perhaps Jeanne would know.'

'I advise you not to question her. Jeanne is an inveterate gossip. She would retail all your remarks to Madame Perrot. After all, Monsieur Perrot's lodger has nothing to do with us. When it is dark you had better keep to this end of the garden, and then you will not be startled.'

This was sensible advice, and I acted on it ; but one evening, just as we were going to supper, I remembered I had left a book belonging to Aunt Catherine on a seat under the trees.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and the long path leading to the little grove was as bright as day. The lawn was bathed in silvery radiance ; only a dark shadow lurked under the trees.

'I wish I had brought Rollo with me,' I thought, as I went

quickly down the path ; but I was ashamed to turn back and call him. I could hear Jeanne singing over her work. Aunt Catherine was arranging some flowers in the salon. They were both within call ; but I confess I wished myself back in the house, when I heard footsteps on the other side of the hedge. With a sudden impulse I caught up the book and drew back into the shade, where no one could see me. The footsteps came nearer, then paused. I felt as though I were suffering nightmare. I was rooted to the spot, and could not move. If only I had Rollo ! then I glanced fearfully behind me. After all, the sight was not so terrible.

A young man was leaning on our little gate and looking at the house. His face was turned from me, but I could just see a little gray peaked cap drawn over his eyes, with a glimpse of dark, closely-cropped hair.

Just then Aunt Catherine's figure blocked up the lighted doorway.

'Olga, my child, where are you?' she exclaimed anxiously.

I dared not answer, for fear of betraying myself. But Aunt Catherine's clear voice had broken the spell. The dark head and gray cap disappeared. A moment afterwards the quick footsteps receded into the distance, and I ran down a side-path towards the house. Aunt Catherine was looking for me.

'Where have you been hiding, Olga? Why did you not answer when I called? I am almost sure I saw some one standing by the gate, only the trees obscured my view. Why, you look quite pale and scared ; was there really some one?'

'Yes, yes !' I exclaimed excitedly ; 'it was a tall man—but I could not see his face—he had a gray tweed coat ; I could see that distinctly, for he was leaning on the gate, Aunt Catherine !' with a little gasp : 'he was watching the house.'

'And why should he not watch the house?' she said cheerfully ; for she saw I was shaking with nervousness. 'You are as bad as Jeanne, Olga. Do you know, nothing would induce her to pass the cemetery at night—no, not if her dearest friend were dying. Is there any law why Monsieur Perrot's lodger should not use his eyes? Have you any idea how bright and pleasant our house looks when the lamps are lighted and there is a warm stream of radiance through the open door? Why should not the poor man stand and admire the cheerful prospect? I daresay he felt like that poor young man in "Excelsior"—don't you remember how it goes?'

"In happy homes he saw the light
Of household fires burn warm and bright ;
Above the spectral glaciers shone,
And from his lips escaped a groan :
Excelsior !"

'Jem has quite spoiled "Excelsior" for me, by parodying it. He destroys all the beauty of my favourite pieces.'

'I call that a blot on Jem's character; the cleverest parody is objectionable to me; it is a worse sin in my eyes than punning; it is as bad as caricaturing one's friends, or mocking them behind their back. You must break Jem of that odious habit.'

'He does it all the more because he knows how it teases me. He has even parodied Longfellow's beautiful poem, "Tell me not in mournful numbers." You know how much I love it; but he turned it all into an ode against eating roast pork; it was so funny and yet so clever.'

'I shall never remember Jem in my will, unless he turn over a new leaf. I think I will tell him that. Well, Olga, have you got over your fright yet? Can you bear to think a human being is solaced by the sight of our lamp?'

'I was a goose to be so frightened; after all, he looked like a gentleman.'

'He! I suppose you mean your artist friend who has managed to drive away your colour? What a silly child you are! but all the same, you must promise me never to go near those trees again after dark unless I am with you.'

I promised this very readily, but Aunt Catherine was in a teasing mood all supper-time, and did not spare me; she even threatened to write to Jem, and tell him what a little coward I was—as though Jem did not know that long ago; and finally she proposed that we should take a turn in the garden, and so exorcise the fearful spirit.

'Oh! I don't mind it a bit with you and Rollo,' I returned, quite pleased at the idea.

'Well, this is a ghostly place, I confess!' she said, as we stood together under the trees. 'Olga, you have infected me with your curiosity. I am actually going a few steps up that path—keep where you are—and I will be back in a moment. Rollo, stop with your mistress.'

'Don't go far,' I pleaded, for the nightmare feeling was returning; but Rollo's glossy head was against me; and in another minute Aunt Catherine returned.

She closed the gate carefully behind her.

'There is a light in the pavilion. Our artist friend works late. I could hear him whistling. The window was wide open, so I did not venture near. What a crazy old building it looks in the moonlight! But it must be a quiet sort of place to work in. What is that Rollo is carrying in his mouth?'

I stooped to look, and Rollo wagged his tail, and dropped some-

thing at my feet. He evidently thought he was presenting me with a treasure. It was a little white cotton glove, such as children wear, with a ragged thumb, as though tiny teeth had been nibbling it.

I looked at it in some bewilderment.

'The Perrots have no little children belonging to them, have they, Aunt Catherine?'

'No; their eldest son is unmarried, and their daughter, a widow, has only one boy of fourteen. I have heard all their family history from Jeanne. I wonder where Rollo found his treasure. Perhaps some children have been weeding the garden.'

'Poor people's children do not wear gloves,' I returned. 'Rollo picked it up by the gate. I saw him sniffing at something in the grass.'

'Perhaps the artist is a married man and has children, and that is why he works so late. Come, I am beginning to take a kindly interest in him. We shall weave quite a romance about him presently. Now, it is getting late; I can hear Jeanne shutting up. Will you light our candles, Olga? and then we will retire to bed.'

CHAPTER XIV

A BUTTERFLY-HUNT

'Dear boy, thy momentary laughter rings
Sincerely out, and that spontaneous glee,
Seeming to need no hint from outward things,
Breaks forth in sudden shouting, loud and free.

'From what hid fountains doth thy joyance flow,
That borrows nothing from the world around?
Its spring must deeper lie than we can know—
A well whose springs lie safely underground.'

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

THE next morning, as I was standing in the sunny courtyard feeding the chickens, Aunt Catherine stepped out of the glass door that opened out of the *salle-à-manger*, in her big flapping hat, with her favourite gossamer veil twisted round it.

'I find I have no important letters to answer this morning,' she said briskly; 'and Jeanne can manage without me, so I shall come down with you to the shore. Do you mind choosing a quieter spot this morning? for those noisy English girls quite disturbed me yesterday.'

'Let us go beyond the little bathing-house. There are some deliciously shady nooks among the rocks,' I returned eagerly, for I rather endorsed her opinion. I had grown tired of the bustle of the bathing-place, with its row of little gaudily-striped cabanes, the splashing and joyous cries of the bathers, and the groups of nurses and children. Some fast-looking men had made acquaintance with a family of English girls, and a great deal of flirtation and giggling had been the result. They made fun of every one; even Aunt Catherine did not escape their witticisms.

'There comes the old maid in the gray hat,' I heard them say once when I was sitting alone among the rocks. 'Does she not look like a flapping seagull? I suppose she is afraid of her com-

plexion. I wonder what has become of the little girl who is always with her; she's not a bad little thing, after all.'

'Do you mean the girl in brown, who swims so well, Fraser?'—but I would not hear any more. Why did those odious creatures take possession of the place? How could any ladylike girls tolerate them? To call my dear Aunt Catherine an old maid, and to sneer because she took care of her smooth, girlish complexion! Oh, I had no patience with them!

So we crossed the common and went down the steep little path by our bathing-house, and after a short scramble over the rocks we found a nice shady corner, where we spent the morning. I had my sketch-book and colour-box with me, as I wanted to send Jem a little painting of the bay, with its rocky islands, and the low-hanging woods on the opposite shore; and Aunt Catherine had her knitting and book. Sometimes when she came to a passage that she liked she read it aloud to me, and that made the time pass very pleasantly.

I think we were both sorry when the time came for going back to La Maisonnette. I was just putting up my painting materials when Aunt Catherine nudged my arm and whispered:

'What a pretty child, Olga!'

I looked up quickly. A young man in a gray tweed coat was springing over the rocks with a little boy in a white sailor suit seated on his shoulder. The child had a little red cap, under which his long hair was streaming in the breeze.

'Gee-gee, Mr. Horse!' he cried gaily. 'Reggie wants to go faster—faster.'

'Hold tight, old man!' was the reply.

As they both passed us the loveliest little face looked down upon us, a small hand waved to Rollo. I started, and uttered a smothered exclamation: the peaked gray cap and dark, closely-cropped hair recalled the intruder of last night. But before I could give vent to this suspicion Aunt Catherine interrupted me.

'Look—look! the child has dropped his cap, and his brother does not know it,' she said anxiously. 'The little creature will have a sunstroke. Oh dear! oh dear!'

My only answer was to jump up. The cap was soon in Rollo's mouth, but he gave it up to me at once. How hot the sun was! Rollo rushed at my side with joyous barks as I flew over the sand. Jem had once told me that I could beat any girl in a fair race; but we were in the shady road beside the washing-pool before I could overtake those long swift strides.

'I beg your pardon,' I panted; 'but the little boy has dropped his cap.'

The young man started and turned round.

'Oh, Reggie!' he said reproachfully; but the boy only burst into a merry laugh.

'Reggie's head is hot,' he said in a tone of perfect satisfaction.

'Thank you so much,' continued the young man. 'Have you run after us all that way—you were sitting under the rocks, were you not? Reggie, thank this lady prettily for the trouble she has taken.'

'Reggie fanks 'oo,' repeated the child glibly.

He had a soft little cooing voice; the young man lifted his gray cap with another 'Thank you,' and went on his way.

'He is quite young,' I said to myself as I walked slowly back. 'There is something almost boyish in his manner; and yet it is a singular face—dark and smooth, and with such pronounced features; but he is a gentleman. I liked his voice.'

'You ran as lightly as a gazelle, Olga,' were Aunt Catherine's first words; 'but, my dear, I fear you must have overheated yourself. Did you ever see a prettier child, Olga? It was such a bewitching little face.'

'I wonder who they can be,' I returned in a puzzled voice. 'I am sure—very nearly sure, at least—that it is the same young man who was leaning on the gate watching our house last night. Of course, I could not see his face, but his figure looked the same.'

'What nonsense, Olga! What could have put such an absurd notion into your head? Monsieur Perrot's lodgers must belong to quite a different class; this young man did not look at all like a poor artist. You know Monsieur Perrot's house is quite a humble cottage; it cannot afford much accommodation.'

'Still, I am convinced it is the same person,' I replied obstinately; and nothing Aunt Catherine could say could alter this opinion in the least. 'I am rather glad I have seen him by daylight,' I finished; 'for now I shall not feel in the least nervous if I hear footsteps behind the hedge again. One does not dread an ordinary young man in a well-cut tweed coat.'

And though Aunt Catherine laughed at this definition, she did not argue the matter any more.

I think the beautiful child must have made an impression on Aunt Catherine's soft heart—she was a child-lover by nature—for she alluded to him again that day, so I knew she had not forgotten him. As for me, I own I had a feeling of curiosity; when one is idle, the smallest trifle will interest one.

Perhaps by this time I was beginning to feel that the life at La Maissonnette was a little solitary. Aunt Catherine might be con-

tent with it, but I was young enough to think that even a mere passing acquaintance would be pleasant. How nice if I had that dear little Reggie to play with! I could fancy him darting over the lawn in pursuit of butterflies: a child would be such an amusement!

The next morning we went to the same place, and I found myself several times looking up from my sketch-book in the hope of seeing a little figure in a white sailor suit playing on the sand; but only a *bonne* and a few chattering children passed us.

As we went home, toiling a little wearily up the steep shady road, Aunt Catherine told me that she had ordered Jules to bring the *fiacre* at half-past two.

'I am going to drive down to the Rue d'Eglise,' she explained, 'in the hope that Monsieur Lefevre has returned. We have been here a fortnight and nothing has been done. Poor Virginia's last letter was so sad; Marsden says she is already wearying for our return.'

'Do you wish to go alone, Aunt Catherine?'

'Yes, dear, I think it will be best; and the drive will be so hot. I have some shopping to do, too; but I shall be back by tea-time. You will not be dull, Olga?'

I scouted this idea with some energy.

'I mean to spend the afternoon under the fir trees below the common,' I said presently. 'I shall get a breeze from the bay there, and it will be cool looking at that green pool belonging to the Château de Clairville.'

'And thinking of the poor drowned boy, Gaston Delaincourt. I think our own little grove would be more cheerful; but I believe you are still afraid of the owner of the pavilion.'

I contradicted this stoutly. I was afraid of no young men in tweed suits, either in daylight or by moonlight. I only wanted variety and a breeze from the bay. So I carried my point, and presently stood on the steep bank looking down at the passers-by in the road beneath, and then, seating myself at the foot of one of the firs with my open book in my lap and Rollo's glossy black head beside me, I soon fell into a blissful day-dream.

It was an enchanting spot; the sombre green pool closed in with trees looked cool and refreshing. To my left were the blue flashing waters of the bay. Some soldiers were going down to the shore. I could see their red shoulder-knots through the trees. I could hear the women's voices from the washing-pool. Below there was life, amusement, human activity; but above was the quiet sunshiny common with its broom and gorse and purpling heather.

We had spent more than an hour in this delicious *far niente* when Rollo suddenly pricked up his ears and sat on his haunches as though suspicious of some crackling sound behind us. I peeped cautiously round the tree-bole. To my astonishment I saw a little white groping figure in the dry ditch; the gleam of a red cap was plainly visible, with long, straight hair under it. The next moment it emerged bodily from the ditch and commenced running down the steep slope leading to the road.

It was rather a dangerous declivity for little feet, and I rose hastily with a warning cry. 'Where could his brother be? surely the child was not alone on the common?' I thought of the cliff with a shudder; even if he ran too fast now, he might tumble into the road below. 'Reggie!' I exclaimed, 'come away!' for the little creature was flashing between the trees like a will-o'-the-wisp; he was evidently in pursuit of a large moth. 'Rollo, lie still!' I said authoritatively, for I was afraid the dog might frighten him if he joined in the chase. Rollo obeyed reluctantly, and sat up panting, and with watery, eager eyes, watching me as I ran down the slope. Reggie saw me and stopped still.

'Reg wants that butterpie,' he said plaintively, pointing with his finger to the tree above us.

'The butterfly has flown away,' I replied, taking his hand.

His dear little face looked hot and eager; his beautiful eyes were large and wistful; he had his cap hugged closely to him; his dark hair was cut across his temples in the fashion children were wearing it just then; he was so pretty I could not help kissing him; but he seemed to take my attention as a matter of course.

'Reg wants to ride on the big doggie,' was his next remark, and he walked up to Rollo in the most confiding way, and patted him. 'Gee up, doggie!'

And actually one little leg was across him before I caught him away.

'Rollo does not like little boys to ride on him. Shake hands with him instead.'

And as Rollo proffered his clumsy big paw, Reggie broke into a fit of musical laughter and clapped his hands before his mouth.

'Funny big doggie! Reggie must not laugh, or the doggie will be angry. Dood-bye, doggie. Reggie wants more butterpies!'

And he was darting away again; but I had my arms round him in a minute.

'Where is Reggie's brother?' I asked. 'Reggie must be a good boy and find him. Good little boys do not run about alone.'

The child seemed perplexed at my question. He looked at me, then at Rollo; then a merry light came into his eyes.

'Reggie wanted butterpies! Reggie runned away! What larks!'

Yes, actually that innocent babe, for he could not have been more than four years old, said 'What larks!' and burst out laughing again.

I was at my wits' end; was he really speaking the truth, or was it only nonsense? but before I could make up my mind to believe him he had escaped from my hand.

'Dood-bye; Reg is going home,' and he was darting round the corner as fast as his little legs would carry him. He laughed more than ever when he saw I was in pursuit of him—it was evidently a rare game to Reggie; in fact, he laughed so much that he had to stop and take breath, so I caught him up easily. He gave me a droll little look then, and put his hand in mine of his own accord.

'Reg is tired,' he observed confidentially; but when I offered to carry him he shook his head with much dignity.

'Where is Reggie's big gee-gee?' I asked, with sudden inspiration. He understood me at once.

'Over there,' he said, pointing in the direction of La Maisonnette. He had led me down one of the paths leading off the common, and we were in a little copse now—beyond us lay some fields. Reggie, who was dragging at my hand rather wearily, pointed to a little path.

'Reggie runned all down there, and the butterpie runned too.'

'Did you come down that path, really?'

He nodded vigorously. I had never been there before, and I had no idea where it led. Reggie seemed acquainted with it; he went along contentedly, now and then stopping to gather a bright-coloured weed, and crooning a little tune to himself. Only once, as the path turned off, and I was still going up the field, he pulled me back.

'Reg lives there,' he said, pointing to a brown, barn-like building in the distance.

With a sort of shock I discovered we were at the back of the pavilion. A little door in the wall stood open; I could see the grass-grown steps, and the apple trees in the kitchen-garden. I was so surprised that I stood quite still, until Reggie gave me a little push and we went in.

Reggie slammed the door behind us; then, quite ignoring my presence, he stumped up the worn steps. I followed him slowly.

'Reggie's tomed back,' he said, pushing open another door; but there was no answer. I guessed at once the room was empty.

I made up my mind that I was entering an artist's studio, but as I followed Reggie I looked round in some surprise—it was fitted up as a living room. It was a large, bare-looking apartment, with three windows, each commanding a different aspect. One of them looked out on our little grove; I could see the empty hammock swaying in the slight breeze.

A ladder communicated evidently with a loft; a gray kitten sat on the lowest step washing its face. The furniture was of the plainest description—a bed, covered with a blue quilt; a wash-stand, with a large green cruche; a round table in one window, an armchair, covered with seedy-looking red velvet, beside it; a portable cupboard, with a coffee-pot and some yellow cups and saucers; another table, with writing materials and books; a wooden chair or two; and a leathern portmanteau, with a rug tossed upon it. There was a small closed stove, but it had not been lighted; on the top was a small tin kettle with a spirit-lamp under it, ready for kindling. Reggie looked round rather piteously.

'Reg wants his tea,' he said, pursing up his dear little mouth as though he were going to cry.

I sat down by the writing-table and took him up in my lap to comfort him. There was a pile of neatly-bound books lying near me. I could just see the titles—an edition of Sophocles, *The Epic of Hades*, *The Light of Asia*, by Edwin Arnold, and Carlyle's *French Revolution*. I had no time to see more; for just then there was a rapid footstep outside—the door was pushed open, and the young man in the gray tweed suit was looking at us from the threshold.

He seemed transfixed with astonishment, and a flush crossed his face as though he were embarrassed. I rose at once, feeling very nervous.

'I beg your pardon,' I stammered, 'for this intrusion; but I found your little brother straying on the common in search of butterflies, and brought him home: the place is not safe for so young a child.'

He was about to answer, but Reggie interrupted him.

'The butterpie runned away, and Reggie runned too,' he said calmly, as though he were stating an important fact.

'Oh, Reg, Reg—how am I ever to trust you again,' replied the young man, taking him in his arms and looking at him with reproachful tenderness—'when you promised me not to stir?' Then turning to me, as I witnessed this little scene with unfeigned interest, he said earnestly: 'I have to thank you a second time on Reggie's behalf. You are quite right—the common is not safe;

it was truly good of you to bring him back! Did Reggie show you the way?’

‘Yes; he led me straight to the pavilion. I was so surprised! I had no idea that we were such near neighbours—that any one really lived here,’ looking round the room as I spoke.

I am afraid my speech was a little blunt, for an odd expression crossed his face—a proud sort of look.

‘I knew we were neighbours,’ he replied rather coolly; ‘for I have often seen you in the garden of La Maisonnette. We are Monsieur Perrot’s lodgers, Reggie and I. He has kindly fitted up this old pavilion for our use. It is rather a rough sort of place, but I like it for a change. We lead a picnic life; it is rather fun, isn’t it, Reg?’

‘You and your little brother?’

Now, as Aunt Catherine said afterwards, I had no right to stand there questioning a perfect stranger; but I cannot account for the strong feeling of interest that prompted me to linger.

He gave a short laugh at my question.

‘You make a mistake; I am Reggie’s father, not his brother,’ he said quickly; and I blushed with annoyance at my error. He continued, as though to set me at my ease, ‘Other people have thought the same as you.’

I was too confused to reply, and was turning away with a murmured ‘Good-morning,’ though it was very nearly evening now, when Reggie stooped from his high perch, for he was seated on his father’s shoulder.

‘Reg wants the lady to kiss him.’

The little darling, how was one to refuse? but as I imprinted a kiss on the smooth baby-face, the young man said hurriedly:

‘I have not thanked you as I ought, and yet you have saved me from a painful shock. If I had found the room empty on my return, I should have feared something had happened to Reggie. I must never leave him again.’ He followed me to the steps, but did not offer his hand. ‘Believe me, I am truly grateful,’ he said with a pleasant smile that seemed to light up his face.

‘Good-bye—good-morning, I mean!’ was my incoherent reply. ‘I am so glad I found him!’ As I stepped into the little grass-grown path I glanced back. They were still there watching me. Reggie waved his hand; his father lifted his cap. I felt myself grow hotter every moment. ‘I am Reggie’s father!’ What an astonishing, what an incredible avowal! That boyish-looking fellow Reggie’s father! and when I came to reflect on it more coolly, why should I be so surprised? The smooth, dark face might be older than it looked. He certainly expressed himself

with manly dignity ; but still he was far, far too young to be a widower, and when I told Aunt Catherine, on her return, she agreed with me that it was very sad.

‘I suppose he is a widower, Olga,’ she said a little doubtfully.

‘Yes, of course,’ I returned eagerly ; ‘he is living there alone with his little boy. Now I come to think of it, he wore a plain gold ring on his finger. You always know a widower by that, and he is in mourning, too ; for though he wears a gray tweed coat, he has a black tie. Oh dear, how sad it seems, Aunt Catherine ! He is a gentleman, and yet he must be very poor—the room looked so bare. It cannot be pleasant to have a ladder in one’s bedroom, and there was no carpet, only a mat or two, on the floor.’

‘You do not know his name ?’

‘No, indeed ; as it was, I am afraid he thought me curious. When he came in he did not seem quite pleased to see me there. I am sure he is proud, and does not want people to know he is poor.’

‘Very possibly. Monsieur Perrot could afford to let him have the pavilion for a trifle. I think it has been used as a store-house before. It is a little awkward for us, having such close neighbours. You cannot help bowing to him, of course, but it will never do to pick up an acquaintance in this way.’

‘Oh, Aunt Catherine, I must speak to that dear little Reggie if I see him.’

Aunt Catherine looked rather dubious at this. The Ladies were very particular on all questions of etiquette, and of course she felt the charge of a young girl rather an onerous responsibility.

‘Well, well, you can just nod to him,’ she said, dismissing the subject, and she told me rather sadly the result of her expedition.

‘Monsieur Lefevre’s brother is not yet dead, Olga. They think he may linger some time yet. A young priest is taking Monsieur Lefevre’s place. I spoke to him for a moment. He was very civil. He told me that it was Monsieur Lefevre’s only brother ; that he was much younger and like a son to him, and that he would not leave him until all was over.

“He may linger some time yet,” he said ; “there is great weakness, but little suffering. He clings to life rather tenaciously, madame. He has not weaned his affections from earth. It is not always easy to wish for death when one is not old, and as to that, the old are not more willing than the young—it takes a saint to die well. Some do not commence their education until the class is called. Many of us are not too ready with our lesson.” Oh, we had quite a conversation in the little dark passage ! He was a good young man ; he spoke feelingly.’

I was not surprised that Aunt Catherine owned herself a little tired—the delay was peculiarly trying to her energetic nature. She wanted to be doing something. But she tried to throw off her lassitude, and made me go on with a book we were reading together, and in which I was much interested.

That night as I went to bed I stood for a few minutes by my open window. The garden was bathed in moonlight, and the leaves of the trees below me had a strange silvery light on them; the summer wind was laden with the perfume of the sleeping flowers.

‘I wonder if Reggie be sleeping too,’ I thought, as I at last turned away reluctantly; and my last thought that night was a vivid remembrance of a little figure flashing between the tree-trunks, and of a radiant upturned face, and eager, groping hands, as the gay-coloured moth fluttered beyond his reach.

CHAPTER XV

A FRIEND IN NEED

'He acted with the steadiness, promptitude, and determination which belonged to riper years.'—*The Monastery*.

'Thou art obliging, friend, and, I doubt not, sincere.'—*Castle Dangerous*.

THE next day was Sunday, and as we walked to the little English church at St. Croix I secretly wondered if the occupant of the pavilion were an orthodox churchgoer, or if he were, like other Bohemians, somewhat irreligious in his habits. I was secretly afraid that this latter surmise might be correct; most likely he was bathing, or boating, or perhaps wandering over the sands with Reggie. Well, it was no business of mine; but all the same a feeling of anxiety would intrude itself on my mind when I thought of that sweet, engaging little creature. 'And he has no one but his father to set him an example,' I finished with youthful severity.

I felt rather ashamed of my rash judgment when, on entering the church, I saw a dark, closely-cropped head before me, and, lower down on the seat, a little figure in a white sailor suit. They were sitting just before us, and as I was kneeling down Reggie looked round and gave me a radiant smile. I could see him afterwards making signs to his father to look too, but he shook his head and took no notice.

What strange creatures we are! I am sure I enjoyed my service all the more for finding I had been wrong in my uncharitable surmise. Reggie was evidently quite accustomed to go to church. After the first minute he behaved beautifully—holding his Prayer-book upside down, and sitting perfectly still during the sermon, with such a dear, prim expression on his little face, as though he knew how good he was. His father, too, seemed very attentive; he repeated all the responses, and sang in a deep,

rich voice. Once I saw him look at Reggie, and a grave, sorrowful sort of expression crossed his face; and then he took the child's hand and held it all the rest of the service.

As we went out they were very near us, and I saw Reggie looking at me wistfully, as though he wanted to speak to me; but as I nodded to him his father drew him quickly on. I know he saw us, for he gave a quick glance round; but as we went out of the gate I saw them walking down the town, as though they were going to St. Genette.

'Your little friend behaved very nicely, Olga,' Aunt Catherine said, as we turned in the opposite direction; 'he was as quiet as a little mouse all the service. And yet when I saw him give you that merry look when we first came in I was half afraid how things might be.'

'I never saw a child behave better.'

'Nor I; he has evidently been well brought up. What an interesting little creature he is! But his father looks very sad.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes; I could see his face plainly once or twice. It was a beautiful sermon, but I do not believe he was listening. He seemed buried in gloomy thoughts, and yet Mr. Baraud was preaching about cheerfulness. He was dressed very well—he is not at all shabby-looking—and yet they are living in that odd way.'

'It is rather difficult to understand, certainly.'

'He is a gentleman—I am sure of it. He was quite aware that you were behind him in the porch, but he thought it better not to take any notice of you. The child was hanging back, but he drew him on. We are such close neighbours that most likely he considers any recognition would be awkward. I call that good taste on his part.'

I would not contradict Aunt Catherine, but I had just felt a little bit offended. It would not have hurt him to have bowed, or to have let Reggie speak to me. I thought it was his stiff English way to keep aloof, just because we had not been formally introduced. Of course he was a gentleman—I did not need Aunt Catherine to tell me that; one's instinct on such a point is never wrong. As I felt slightly touchy, I thought it better to drop the subject; so I began talking about Jem—dear old fellow!—and that always put me in a good humour.

I was not surprised that they were missing at evening service. Reggie was too young a child for that; but as we were walking down the steep cliff-path leading to the washing-pool, on our return, I saw the young man standing under a clump of trees looking at the bay.

As we were passing he turned quickly round, and we came face to face. He looked startled, and muttered a 'good-evening' as he took off his cap. Aunt Catherine made no remark, neither did I. We both knew he was following us up the lane. As we turned in at the great brown gate, he walked quickly past, looking straight before him.

The next morning we spent some hours on the shore, as usual, and in the afternoon we sat under the trees in the garden. As I knew we were overlooked from the pavilion, I would not use the hammock, and sat up as sedately as Aunt Catherine. I was buried in my book, and was not a little startled when the violent shaking of the little gate behind me roused me from my novel, and there stood Reggie, peeping at us between the bars.

'Open gate for Reggie,' he shouted.

Aunt Catherine rose at once.

'What do you want, my dear?' she asked very kindly. 'You must run away, or father will be looking for you.'

But Reggie stood his ground.

'Who are you? Reggie does not know you; Reggie wants the little lady. Open, please'—shaking the gate again.

'Reggie! what are you doing there?' exclaimed a stern voice. 'Come away this moment!'

The child looked perplexed; his father's sternness was evidently new to him.

'Father, come and open the gate,' he said, with wistful confidence. 'Reggie wants to play with the lady.'

'No—nonsense!' and a hasty stride followed the word.

The young man was just snatching him up, when I said piteously, for the beautiful, eager little face was too much for my stoicism:

'Oh, please—please do let me have him for a little, Aunt Catherine! Do let me have him! I should so like to play with him!'

I do not know what Aunt Catherine thought of my impulsiveness, but she certainly made the best of it.

'Will you spare him to us for a little while?' she said, with her kind smile. 'This young lady is so fond of children. We will take great care of him.'

The young man bowed gravely; he seemed more embarrassed than pleased.

'Certainly, if you are so kind as to wish for my little boy's company. Reggie, old fellow, mind you behave yourself like a gentleman.' He set him down, and opened the gate. 'Please send him back directly you are tired of him. Reggie knows his

way home;' and with another bow that included me he went back to the pavilion.

Reggie jumped into my arms with a delighted shout, and seemed to like my hugging him. Then he pointed to the hammock, which he called a swing, and very soon he was lying in it with his eyes shut, 'going to sleep.' We had a fine romp after that—Reggie and Rollo and I. Aunt Catherine sat and watched us as we dodged each other among the tiny flower-beds, or played at hide-and-seek in the bushes. Sometimes we hid from Rollo, and he was as clever as possible finding us out.

When Jeanne brought us our coffee, we sent her back for milk and biscuits for Reggie. He seemed almost too excited to eat. Once, when a butterfly skimmed past us, he jumped up in pursuit. The graceful little body darted hither and thither over the lawn.

'Isn't he lovely!' I exclaimed, as he ran back to us, his eyes sparkling with glee.

'Butterpie gone home,' he said. 'Reggie caught one yesterday;' and he sat down contentedly to his biscuits again.

A little later, as he was swinging again in the hammock, I thought I would have some conversation with him, so I began by saying:

'Reggie dear, do you remember poor mamma?'

'Mamma's an angel!' he returned promptly, with a sentimental air. 'They put her in the ground to grow. Father said so.'

'Dear me! What an extraordinary idea to put into a child's head, Olga!'

Reggie looked up at the sky in a contemplative manner—his expression was heavenly—then he looked at me anxiously.

'Will mamma grow? Reggie digged for her once. Reggie digged, and digged; but mamma was not there—only nasty black worms; so Reggie runned away. Reggie hates black worms!'

'Don't question him any more, Olga!' interrupted Aunt Catherine; 'he is such a baby, and of course his ideas of death are confused. I have been thinking that, after all, it is not a bad idea on the part of Reggie's father. The seed planted grows into the lovely flower; so the child's imagination pictures a growing angel. Think of the infantine faith—the baby hands digging for the lost mother. What marvels children are! no miracle would astonish their innocent eyes, and why? because life to them is one miracle. Don't you think we might learn a lesson from them? Why are we human children to think ourselves grown up with our heavenly Father? How the angels must wonder at us!'

Aunt Catherine was in one of her gentle, moralising moods, but Reggie interrupted her by suddenly scrambling out of the hammock.

‘Dood-bye ; Reggie must go home now.’

‘Of course, the child has been with us for two hours—he is quite right, dear little fellow!’ and Aunt Catherine opened the gate with suspicious alacrity. Reggie started through it.

‘Reggie is here, father!’ we heard him say. The answer also reached us :

‘That’s right : what a time you have been, old man !’

Aunt Catherine was unusually thoughtful that evening. But I was rather amused when at supper she suddenly broke out into a little incoherent speech, in which my injudicious impulsiveness and her own blamable softness of heart were rather severely rebuked.

‘I quite allow for the temptation,’ she went on ; ‘but it is always best to think before one speaks. I am afraid it was rather a liberty on our part. I am not sure the young man was pleased ; I know it was hard to refuse the darling—such a sweet little pleading face as it was !—but we cannot be too careful in a place like this. What do we know about this young man, except that he looks like a gentleman, and lives in rather a Bohemian fashion ? and he is not even an artist ;’ as though, in Aunt Catherine’s opinion, this somehow complicated matters.

I am afraid my argument in return for this piece of excellent good sense was strictly feminine, therefore no argument at all :

‘I can’t help all that, Aunt Catherine ; Reggie has fascinated me—I have fallen in love with him, he is such a dear !’ and though Aunt Catherine shook her head at this girlish remark, she evidently thought it useless to pursue the subject.

As her warning was in vain, she had recourse to diplomacy. So the next afternoon, as I was preparing to go in the garden, she observed that it would be pleasanter on the common. I was about to remonstrate, but I saw from her expression that she had made up her mind on the subject, so I thought it best to say nothing.

It was the first afternoon that I did not thoroughly enjoy, but when we went back to take our coffee in the *salle-à-manger*, Jeanne met us with uplifted hands.

‘*Le pauvre enfant !* ah, it was heartbreaking !’

‘What do you mean ?’ I exclaimed brusquely, pushing past Aunt Catherine. ‘Surely nothing has happened to Reggie ?’

Mille pardones ! no, there was nothing to make *la demoiselle* look so scared. But all the same, it made her (*Jeanne*) *triste* to

see the little angel shaking the gate, and calling for la demoiselle. 'The lady who smiles,' that is what he called the demoiselle, whom he implored to open the gate. 'C'est moi, Reggie,' he affirmed constantly, and she (Jeanne) could not pacify him; poor little one! he had cried so bitterly, and monsieur had lifted him in his arms and kissed him a dozen times as he carried him away.

'Ah! Aunt Catherine,' I said reproachfully, and the dear thing looked quite sorry, and ashamed of herself. Her simple little ruse had inflicted pain, and Aunt Catherine hated to give pain, even to a fly. I think we both had a pathetic picture in our minds at that moment, of a little wistful face peering into a forbidden paradise. 'The lady who smiles'—what a pretty description! and what a stupid thing conventionality was, if it would not allow one to play with a child!

Aunt Catherine's primness was not proof against all this pathos and disappointment, and the next afternoon she had no objection to allege against our favourite resort; but this time there was no interruption. Of course Reggie was a prisoner in the pavilion; his father's pride could not brook interference from strangers; Reggie must be kept out of harm's way. 'The lady who smiled' was an embarrassing and unnecessary personage in the estimation of this perverse young man.

Later in the evening I took a solitary stroll. Aunt Catherine was tired; but, as I was restless, she would not keep me in. 'Do not go too far, Olga, and come back before the dusk sets in,' were her parting words.

I had every intention of fulfilling these two injunctions faithfully; but it was a delicious evening, and the lanes were enticing. I wandered on, and the soft creeping twilight found me still some distance from La Maissonnette.

I had met few people—an old woman with two tethered cows grazing by the roadside, a boy in a blue blouse, a little girl with a string of red beads round her neck; but by and by I heard footsteps the other side of the hedge, then voices. Two people were walking down the field path, within a few feet of me, evidently bound for the same direction. An undefinable feeling of pleasure crossed me as I recognised Reggie's voice.

'Father.'

'Well, what is it, old fellow? Tired, eh?'

'Reggie's legs ache dedful.'

'Poor little legs! No wonder, when they have been running about all day! Here; climb up, old man.'

'No, fank 'oo. Reggie too tired to ride gee-gee.'

'What, quite used up? Never mind; father will carry Reggie in his arms all the way home. Is that comfortable?'

'Verry comforble, fank 'oo,' evidently cuddling up in sleepy fashion. 'Father sing to Reggie now.'

'Sing you to sleep? No, that will never do; wait till we get home. Look at those stars; are they not bright? Don't go to sleep yet, my boy. Try and talk to father; poor father is so dull.'

'So dull,' echoed Reggie in a drowsy voice.

'Father has no one but Reggie now. What would he do without his little boy, I wonder?'

'He would kye,' very promptly.

'Oh, if crying would mend matters, father would cry an ocean full; but we can't wash out our mistakes in that fashion; there is no blessed Lethe for us poor human beings. Some of us have a taste of purgatorial fires in this world. You love father, don't you, Reg?'

'Reggie loves father dedfully.'

'That's my own boy! Well, I have you—my one blessing out of all the cursed wreck; so there is no need for the enemy to blaspheme.'

I was so afraid of hearing more that I put my fingers in my ears and hurried on. Had I done wrong to listen? and yet how could I have avoided it?—only the hedge divided us. Every tone of the deep, intense voice seemed to vibrate almost painfully in my ears; the chord of hopeless sadness underlying the fatherly tenderness was distinctly audible to me. At the words 'Father has only Reggie now' there was a sigh, long-drawn and pitiful, as though an open grave were yawning before his eyes.

The tears sprang to my own as I heard it; he was so young to be so sorely tried. As I hurried down the narrow winding lane, I remembered a gate opened into the field: probably they would come through it. In my eagerness to avoid an embarrassing rencontre so far from home, I walked on quickly and heedlessly. The dusk was confusing; the high overhanging hedges made it still darker.

I was vexed at my own carelessness in having wandered so far from home, and afraid that Aunt Catherine would soon become anxious at my delay; and this mixture of emotions absorbed my thoughts, and I stumbled on blindly. The next minute I struck against a stone, and my foot doubled up under me. The sudden pain told me what had happened—it was a slight sprain.

I sat down on the fallen log of a tree not far from the gate to recover myself, until the pain subsided. It was not a pleasant

state of things. Granted that the sprain was not a severe one, it was still sufficient to retard my progress. I got up and tried to stand. Yes, it was possible; I could limp along pretty fairly. But if the pain got worse? The ankle was swelling, too. I sat down again, and unfastened my boot with difficulty; this gave me a little ease, and I determined to make a fresh start—'Nil desperandum,' as Jem used to say.

At this moment footsteps approached the gate—it was unlatched. I could just see a tall dark figure turn into the lane. It would have to pass me, but I determined to take no notice. I had some flowers in my lap, and I busied myself with them, hoping that in the dusk he would not be able to recognise me. I thought he was about to stop, but he evidently thought better of it, and walked on rather slowly.

I was unwilling to be left alone in the gathering darkness, so I thought I would follow them. Even the sense of their nearness would be company; but I got up too quickly, and was obliged to sit down again with a suppressed groan. In a moment the footsteps came back.

'Have you hurt yourself? Can I help you in any way?' asked a voice anxiously.

I thought it was impossible that he could recognise me. He evidently thought he was addressing a stranger.

'I struck against a stone just now, and I fear I have sprained my ankle; it is not very bad, and I shall be able to walk directly; but I got up too quickly.'

'Why, it is the lady from La Maissonnette!' he returned with some surprise. 'It was too dark to recognise you. Reggie, wake up; this is your friend.'

'Is it the smiling lady, father?' asked Reggie in a very sleepy voice.

'That is what the rogue always calls you; but I am truly sorry for your misfortune.' How very friendly and kind his voice sounded! though it was impossible to read his expression. I could barely see the outline of his features. 'I am afraid you are in pain,' and then he added rather impatiently, 'I want to be of use; but it is so confoundedly dark under these trees that I cannot see how to help you. It is much lighter farther on.'

'Please do not trouble about me,' I returned hastily; 'my foot is better now, and I think I can manage to walk. Reggie is so tired, and I know it is time for him to be in bed. You must not let me detain you.'

A short laugh answered me.

'Do you think that is the way that Reggie and I mean to

prove our neighbourliness—to pass by on the other side? and especially as we have to thank you for two or three kindly services—by bringing my naughty runaway back, for example, on that terribly hot afternoon. Now please tell me how I am to help you. I can easily carry Reggie on one arm and give you the other ;’ and as though he read my hesitation aright, he continued more earnestly : ‘ Indeed, I am very strong, and the boy is no weight at all. Put your arm round father’s neck, Reggie, and hold tight. That’s right, boy. Now, then, let me see how you can stand ;’ and the next moment a strong hand assisted me to rise. ‘ Come, that is capital ! Can you put your foot to the ground ?’

‘ Yes—I think so,’ making the attempt carefully. ‘ Of course it hurts, and I shall have to walk very, very slowly ; but I do not think it is a severe sprain.’

‘ I am glad to hear it—now—Miss—Miss—oh, I forgot !’ with a slightly nervous laugh ; ‘ but will you take my arm, please, and just use me as a crutch.’

‘ My name is Leigh,’ I returned, as I obeyed.

Oh, Aunt Catherine, what would you say to see me now? but necessity knows no laws. We moved along slowly, and there was silence for a minute or two, and then my companion said very kindly :

‘ How are you getting on, Miss Leigh? Does it hurt much? Excuse me, but you are not making sufficient use of me. I am afraid I am not of much assistance after all.’

‘ Oh yes, you are, thank you, and the pain is not very bad. How your arm must ache, carrying Reggie ! He is asleep, is he not ?’

‘ Fast asleep, poor little beggar ! We have been too far this evening, and I have tired him out ; he is such a plucky little chap that one forgets what a baby he is.’

‘ He is a darling,’ I returned, half under my breath, but my remark was overheard.

‘ I don’t think there are many children of his age like him. You would not believe how sensible he is, and such a companion ! Perhaps I am not impartial,’ and I could feel he was smiling ; ‘ but he is just perfect in my eyes.’

I was about to answer ; but my foot came in contact with another loose stone, and I gave a little cry of pain. He stopped at once.

‘ Oh dear ! I am afraid that was my fault. Will you wait just a moment, and I will shift the boy to the other arm, and then I can help you much better? Now then, lean all your weight on me. Don’t be scrupulous, Miss Leigh. I am a tower of strength.

We are getting on famously, and every footstep is bringing us nearer home. Does talking worry you? Would you rather have me hold my tongue?’

‘No—talk, please,’ I replied faintly, for my foot was pretty bad now; ‘it will make me forget the pain a little. Talk about Reggie—anything.’

‘You are very brave,’ in a grave, pitying voice; ‘I did not think a girl—I beg your pardon, a young lady—could be so brave. Do you see that twinkling light? that is where my landlord, Monsieur Perrot, lives. What a droll old fellow he is! Madame, his wife, matches him in drollery—they are a curious couple.’

‘Are they?’

‘They are interesting from a psychological point of view. Monsieur Perrot is a consummate egoist; his ego is the central point in creation; everything revolves round it—“C’est moi : après nous la deluge” is stamped ineffaceably on every word and action.’

‘He seems to me a stupid, fat old man, and oh! so ugly.’

‘His stupidity and egoism are synonymous terms; to me it is a grand denseness. Few people have a genius for creating their own fog. Imagine the serenity of a human being who dwells in a moral atmosphere so thick that no hostile criticism, no unkind opinion can penetrate it. Fog! I have used a wrong metaphor: it is more like the rhinoceros’ hide, invulnerable to the sharpest dart. When I think of all this I could bring myself to envy Monsieur Perrot, in spite of his stupidity, his stoutness, and, as I think you added, his ugliness.’

‘You are a philosopher.’

‘Pardon me, I am nothing of the kind; a philosopher is not an impatient, irritable sort of mortal, is he? Perhaps I love to rail on all mankind, like our friend the melancholy Jaques. Are you a student of Shakespeare, Miss Leigh?’

‘My brother Jem reads it to me sometimes. Would you mind waiting a moment, Mr. ——?’

‘I see, we have not been properly introduced—not according to the golden rules of Mrs. Grundy—so I may as well tell you my name is Fleming. There is a wall behind you, if you like to lean upon it; but I can tell you for your comfort that we have not much farther to go.’

‘Are you sure of that? oh, I am so thankful!’ but my voice was very faint.

His only answer was to kneel down in the dusty road and gently lift the suffering foot, and place his hand under it as a support.

‘This will give you a moment’s ease from the strain. I can tell from your voice what you are feeling; without some relief you

will turn faint, and we have still this long road to La Maissonnette. If you were not afraid to be left alone in this dark road, I would run on and get you some help—may I? I should not be ten minutes away. Are you afraid?’

‘No—o; if—if you will be back soon,’ but it was the biggest fib I ever told in my life.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LITTLE HOUSE ON THE CLIFF

'This is not a man to be driven from his temperament without some sufficient cause.'—*The Monastery*.

'I do not take offence easily.'—*Rob Roy*.

My unpleasant sensations told me that Mr. Fleming was right (how strange he should have that name!). A horrible feeling of sickness was creeping over me, and but for the relief his strong hand was giving, I could hardly have borne the pain. To my surprise, however, he did not move.

'Are you not going?' I asked a minute later.

'No, certainly not; I must stay now.'

'But why?'

'As though you do not know! Do you always tell fibs, Miss Leigh? your shaky "No" was decidedly one just now. You are horribly afraid at the idea of being left alone for ten minutes; I am sorry for it, because I should like to spare you any more suffering, but what can I do? If I dared, I would put Reggie down and carry you to La Maissonnette, but I dare not run the risk—he might wake up and be frightened, or a vehicle might pass with a driver the worse for cider.'

'Mr. Fleming! as though I would permit such a thing!'

'I am afraid I should not wait for your permission, if it were the thing to do; but the fact is, I do not dare. Now, will you make one more attempt, for Reggie's sake?—he is so uncomfortable on my shoulder.'

I am sure now that he said it to rouse me, for Reggie was sleeping most sweetly; but if this were his intention he succeeded, and in another minute I was limping along to the best of my ability, in spite of shooting pain and growing faintness. Mr. Fleming kept up a ceaseless flow of talk, but I was no longer

capable of intelligent interest. I seemed to hear disconnected sentences in a sort of dream, then detached words: 'the farm'; 'take care'; 'a ditch there'; 'a lantern at the gate'; 'looking out'; 'sensible people'; then I was dimly conscious that I was more tightly held; a light flashed in my face, and, 'Oh, Olga, my poor child!' in Aunt Catherine's pitying tones; and then for a moment I knew no more.

When I regained complete consciousness I was lying on the couch in our pretty little salon, and Aunt Catherine was beside me. Reggie was curled up, still fast asleep, on an opposite couch, and Mr. Fleming was walking across the room with a glass of water.

'Oh, I am all right now,' I said feebly; 'it was only the pain. Aunt Catherine, please thank Mr. Fleming; he has been so good to me; he must have had a miserable time of it.'

'Not quite so miserable as you had;' but I noticed he looked rather pale and tired as he spoke. 'Miss Leigh has behaved like a heroine: I never saw greater pluck. Now your foot must be attended to at once, so I will wish you good-night.'

He bowed, and was about to withdraw; but I put out my hand impulsively, and Aunt Catherine followed my example.

'I do indeed thank you,' she said very warmly; and then I asked if I might kiss Reggie, and Mr. Fleming brought him to me at once.

Aunt Catherine did not harass me with questions when we were left alone; she rang for Jeanne to assist me to my room, and after fomenting the inflamed and swollen ankle most tenderly, she bandaged it as skilfully as a trained nurse would have done.

It was only when I was comfortably in bed, and enjoying some sandwiches and a glass of delicious lemonade, that she drew from me an account of my accident, and listened with the deepest interest.

'It was quite an adventure, Olga,' she said when I had finished. 'But, my dear, you have given me an hour of terrible anxiety; I have been walking up and down the lane, and Jeanne has been standing at the gate I do not know how long. If you had been ten minutes later I should have gone round to Monsieur Perrot for assistance.'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, I am so sorry! But indeed I never meant to go so far, and creeping home after this fashion has taken me such a time.'

'Well—well, I will not scold you; you have been punished enough. If it had not been for our neighbour you would have fared badly. I think I shall write a proper little note of thanks

in the morning, and tell him how you are, or he will be calling to inquire. What did you say his name was—not Fleming, surely?’ and her voice changed a little.

‘Yes, it is Fleming; do you think he is any relation?’

‘Certainly not,’ she returned promptly. ‘He is no relation of Robert Fleming—if that is what you mean. I recollect his telling me that he had no one belonging to him in the world, except an old uncle, and his name was Faber.’

‘It is very strange!’ I persisted.

‘I do not know why you should say so; Fleming is not such an uncommon name, is it? I knew some people who called themselves the Gough-Flemings. Oh yes; and there was a Mrs. Samuel Fleming, too; it is a name I like very much;’ and Aunt Catherine played thoughtfully with the fringe of the quilt as she spoke.

After a moment she began again:

‘I think on the whole our neighbour behaved very well, Olga. He is a gentleman; I liked his voice and manner exceedingly.’

‘Oh yes; and he was so kind. He was not a bit stiff really, when he saw I was in trouble.’

‘I wonder if I have ever seen him before—I mean in England; his face did not seem quite strange to me.’

‘Nor to me either; how funny!’

‘No, not funny. The world is not so large, after all, and one stumbles upon people in all sorts of unexpected places. He is not handsome; I am not quite sure I like his face: his eyes are a little cold, and I should judge from his mouth that he has a temper. When you see him closely he is not so very young, after all.’

‘How do you mean?’ for I was not quite pleased with all this criticism. Mr. Fleming had been so kind, so considerate, that it did not seem quite fair to him.

‘Well, he might be seven or eight and twenty—even more. There is a worn look about him that hardly belongs to youth. Depend upon it, he has known trouble.’

As though I were not as sure of that as Aunt Catherine; but I was not going to repeat what I had heard. Could I ever forget those bitter, half-mocking words: ‘There is no blessed Lethe for us poor human beings; some of us have a taste of purgatorial fires in this world,’ followed by that broken ‘I have you, my one blessing out of all this cursed wreck’? That tone of utter hopelessness—what could it mean?

Aunt Catherine bade me good-night after this, and I was glad to be left to my own thoughts. The remedies had given me relief, and

I was now in tolerable comfort ; but all the same, sleep seemed to have forsaken me. I tossed restlessly and feverishly on my pillow, now recalling the incidents of the past evening, and now perplexing myself with curious conjectures on the subject of our mysterious neighbour. He was a perfect stranger. I had only just learned his name, and yet I felt a profound interest in him—his loneliness, his melancholy, his strange, reckless words, and the wonderful affection that seemed to subsist between him and his boy, had somehow stirred the quick sensibilities of my nature. How kind and helpful he had proved himself in an emergency ! Most men of his age would have been either awkward or embarrassed, or else they would have presumed and grown familiar ; but I could not but own that his behaviour had been perfect. In a moment he had put me at my ease, by the way he seemed to forget himself in his anxiety to be of service. Only the truest good-breeding and an innately kind heart could have taught him such unselfish courtesy.

‘If I could only do something for him in return !’ I thought, as I lay looking out into the starry darkness, while the night breeze, perfumed with the odour of flowers, stole in at the open window. ‘If only Aunt Catherine, dear thing that she is, were not such a stickler for propriety ! if she would only make friends with him and find out why he is so unhappy ! Why is it wrong, I wonder, to be kind and companionable with our neighbours, even if they be strangers. I think the world is a stupid place, after all. I suppose we shall be obliged to know all sorts of people in heaven.’

I am afraid my midnight philosophy was not particularly wholesome, for Aunt Catherine shook her head when she saw me the next morning.

‘You will just have to stay where you are for the rest of the day,’ was the only consolation she gave me ; ‘your bad night has made you look like a ghost. As I am going down to St. Croix this morning, I shall ask Dr. Addison to look at your foot.’

‘Oh, Aunt Catherine, do you think that is necessary ? it is not a severe sprain ; you said so yourself last night.’

‘No ; but you have aggravated it by that long walk, and it is as well to be on the safe side. Why, Olga, you look ready to cry ! Surely one day in your room is not such a terrible punishment.’

‘I am so vexed at my own stupid carelessness, and it is such a lovely day,’ I grumbled ; ‘think how delicious the shore would be this morning !’

‘You may just leave the shore alone, and go to sleep instead,’ was her unsympathising answer. ‘I don’t see why Rollo need be

a prisoner, too, so I shall take him as my escort. Good-bye, you tiresome child ;' but I detained her.

'Shall you write that note, Aunt Catherine ?'

'Well, I don't know,' dubiously ; 'our neighbour has been already to inquire. He came before I was down, and as Jeanne knew nothing about your bad night, she had not much to tell him, so he left his compliments and went away.'

'I think a note would only be civil. We hardly said anything to him last night !'

'Well, I will see about it when I come back, for I have not a moment to spare now. I must be at the market early to get you some fruit ; and there is Dr. Addison and a hundred other things ;' and then she called Rollo and left me.

I spent the morning in sleep. When Dr. Addison examined my foot he prescribed a simple remedy and a few days' rest.

'You will not be able to run about for a week or two,' he said—he was a nice old man, and spoke in a sort of fatherly way—'but there is no need to keep you a prisoner. Get some one to carry you out in the garden, or in a day or two you might have a drive. Fresh air will do you good, and we must not make an invalid of you !'

I felt quite cheered by this sensible prescription, and when Aunt Catherine returned to my room she told me that she and Jeanne had discovered an old wheeled chair in an outhouse.

'So there will be no difficulty at all,' she went on, 'in carrying out Dr. Addison's advice. Jeanne can wheel you into the shade, and we can make up a sort of impromptu couch with two or three chairs. And in a day or two you shall have a drive.'

'May I go into the garden to-day ?'

'No, not to-day. Dr. Addison thinks you will be better where you are ;' for I was lying comfortably outside my bed. Then she said, in rather a hesitating manner : 'There was no need for that note, after all, Olga. I encountered Mr. Fleming in the market, and he walked back with me. He saw I was somewhat laden with the fruit, so he at once offered to assist me. I found him very good company ; he seems well read and full of information. We talked a good deal about Oxford ; he is an Exeter man.'

'Did he say whether he had any profession ?' I asked eagerly.

'No ; he is singularly reticent. It was quite by accident he mentioned Exeter. "When I was there," he said, "in my undergraduate days——" and then he stopped, and spoke of something else directly ; but he talks exceedingly well.'

'Did you like the look of him better this morning ?' was my next question.

'I have never disliked the look of him,' she returned; 'but his face somehow baffles me. He has such a cold expression until he smiles, and then his features seem to light up. It is not a happy face, Olga; there are such bitter lines round the mouth. But I confess he interests me.'

'And me also.'

'Yes, I know; but we must be careful. There is one thing about him that I like—he certainly does not presume; indeed, I have a suspicion that he does not wish for our acquaintance. But that may be my fancy.'

'Purely fancy, I should say.'

Something in my tone seemed to strike Aunt Catherine, for she closed the subject abruptly, by showing me the basket of fruit and flowers she had brought; and I was too much touched by her thoughtful kindness to say anything more about Mr. Fleming.

An hour later I was lying with my eyes closed, thinking of Kitty and the children, when the door softly opened, and Rollo's tail began to wag in a friendly fashion. The next moment something warm and soft darted at me, and Reggie scrambled up upon my bed.

'Take care of my poor foot! Oh, you darling! Who brought you?' and I nearly smothered him with kisses.

Reggie took them as a matter of course; he was used to being loved. He had two or three clover-stalks in his hot hand.

'Reggie has picked you flowers,' he said proudly.

'But who brought you, my sweet?'

'Lady brought Reggie,' he replied promptly; and then I knew Aunt Catherine had contrived this little surprise for me.

Reggie seemed mystified by my apparent laziness. He wanted me to get up and play with him, and when I explained matters he insisted Rollo should come up too; so we were all of a heap together. I told him stories at last to keep him quiet. I recollect one was about a little white, downy owl with round yellow eyes, who lived with her children in an ivy-bush. I regret to say that Reggie repeated this tale under the title of 'the howl what lives in the ivy-bush,' and he was so much pleased with it that when I had finished he wanted me to begin it all over again. Reggie stayed with me some time, and was as good as possible. He went away reluctantly when Jeanne came to fetch him.

'Monsieur son père was standing at the little gate, and had requested that le petit should be brought to him,' she said.

I raised myself up when Jeanne had left the room. Yes, I could see the gray cap between the branches; he was standing by the hammock waiting for his boy.

'Reggie has forgotten father,' I could hear him say, as the little figure bounded along the gravel walk, and then Reggie sprang into his father's arms with a merry laugh.

The next morning I was carefully wheeled by Jeanne into my favourite grove, and there I spent the rest of the day, and many succeeding days, very happily with my work and books. Reggie was my constant companion; every afternoon, exactly at the same time, he would come running down the little path and call to me to open the gate. If Aunt Catherine were absent, I had to summon Jeanne. Mr. Fleming never made his appearance; once I caught sight of him in the distance, but he never obtruded himself.

Reggie would play happily for hours. At first he could not understand why I would not play hide-and-seek with him and Rollo. He would run away and hide, and presently I would hear his dear little voice calling me; but I had to send Rollo instead. Once he called so long and so imploringly that Aunt Catherine accompanied Rollo.

'Look at Reggie!' he cried triumphantly. 'Reggie is Mrs. Howl in the ivy-bush.'

Sometimes he lay contentedly in the hammock while I told him fresh stories. He did not care for tales about good little boys or girls, but a story about a squirrel, a mouse, or a rabbit instantly commanded his attention.

'Ah, ah! Mr. Bunny,' he would say, 'Mr. Fox found you out. Go on, my dear;' for this was the patronising phrase he had adopted for me. I suppose he found 'the smiling lady' too long for ordinary occasions. How Aunt Catherine laughed when she first heard him!

'What a droll little creature he is!' she would say; but she soon grew excessively fond of him.

One afternoon, or rather evening, I had my promised drive, and I enjoyed it so much that Aunt Catherine told Jules to come daily. I was sitting in the fiacre one evening, waiting for Aunt Catherine to come out, when I saw Mr. Fleming coming up the lane. He was walking rather wearily, and Reggie was running on before him.

Of course Reggie recognised me with a shout; but as I leant over the side of the fiacre to warn him from coming too close, Mr. Fleming came up hurriedly and lifted him out of harm's way; and then he could not do less than speak to me.

'I am glad to see you out again, Miss Leigh,' he said rather gravely, and I understood why Aunt Catherine thought his face cold, for there was not the gleam of a smile on it. 'I am afraid you have had a trying time lately.'

'Oh no,' I replied rather timidly, for his manner did not put me at my ease, and he did not seem in the least pleased to see me. 'I have been out in the garden all day, and you have been kind enough to spare Reggie to me a good deal, so I have not been dull.'

Then his face did relax a little.

'There is no keeping Reggie away; you and Miss Sefton have spoiled him. He is always wanting to come to you.'

'I have not kissed my Dear,' observed Reggie, in such a sentimental tone that we both burst out laughing, and after that he could not quite stiffen again. But this friendly mood was brief.

The next minute Aunt Catherine came out of the house. She seemed pleased to see Mr. Fleming, and shook hands with him as he helped her into the carriage. But he responded in the briefest manner to her pleasant speech, and, taking Reggie's hand, walked on.

Aunt Catherine looked after him thoughtfully.

'Had you been talking long to Mr. Fleming, Olga?'

'No; only three or four minutes. He did not seem quite like himself; he was rather cool in his manner.'

'I was thinking the same myself. One cannot help being civil, of course; but if you take my advice you will say as little as possible to Mr. Fleming. Any attention on our part seems to embarrass him. For some reason or other, he certainly does not mean to know us. I never saw any other young man so reserved, and with whom it was so difficult to get on.'

I was too much chagrined at Mr. Fleming's coolness to contradict her. And yet how different he had been that evening! But it was no use thinking of that.

In a week's time I was able to hobble about a little; but it was some days after that I went down to the shore for the first time since my accident. Aunt Catherine had letters to write as usual—to her lawyer, her bailiff, and to one of her tenants—indeed, she had business to occupy her until luncheon. The morning was sultry and sunless, and Aunt Catherine begged me not to go farther than the little bathing-house, as she thought a storm was threatening, and as my opinion coincided with hers, I readily promised to follow her injunction.

The hour that followed was not entirely enjoyable. I was oppressed by the stillness and airlessness of the atmosphere. The bay had a leaden, oily aspect. I was peculiarly susceptible to any sombre influences, and I was conscious of a sense of heaviness as I looked out on my favourite scene, as though I were regarding a dear friend under sinister circumstances.

By and by a few heavy drops warned me. As I put up my sketching materials hastily, they fell faster and faster. As I could only walk slowly, I was slightly damp before I had unlocked the door of the bathing-house and had taken refuge in the tiny room.

A moment later I heard hasty footsteps ; some one was dashing up the steep little path leading to our common. To my surprise it was Mr. Fleming, with Reggie, as usual, on his shoulder. Out of sheer humanity, for the thunder-shower was very heavy, I begged him to enter ; and without a moment's hesitation he accepted my invitation, and, depositing Reggie on the wooden table, began rubbing him down with his handkerchief, while Reggie comported himself like a frisky little pony.

'Thank you so much for this shelter, Miss Leigh,' he said quite cordially. 'I actually dashed past the open door without seeing it until you called me. I am thankful for Reggie's sake, for I don't mind a wetting myself ; but he is such a delicate little fellow.'

'Oh, I hope he has taken no harm,' for his sailor suit felt a little damp.

'Oh no, the rain will soon be over ; it is too violent to last. Will you not sit down, Miss Leigh ? I see you still walk rather lamely ;' and he brought me one of the wooden chairs, and took the other himself.

Mr. Fleming's manner had decidedly thawed since our last meeting. Perhaps he considered it was his duty to entertain me in return for my hospitality ; for he began talking about the book he had under his arm, and asked if I had read it. I forget its title, but he gave me a *résumé* of the contents, and criticised it in a masterly fashion. I wished Aunt Catherine could have heard him. After that, he sat looking down at the bay, while Reggie played at his feet with Rollo.

'Isn't that grand, Miss Leigh ?' he said presently. 'I do like looking at a large expanse of water ; it gives me such a sense of freedom.'

There was a strange intensity in his expression as he watched the dark water and the driving rain, and some impulse made me say :

'You speak as though freedom were the chief blessing to be desired in life.'

'So it is,' he answered shortly, and his eyes were still fixed on the bay ; 'there is nothing to compare with it in my opinion ; and yet how few men are really free !'

'How do you mean, Mr. Fleming ?'

He turned round and gave me a quick searching glance, as though my question disturbed him.

'Oh, it is not easy to explain my meaning ;' and there was a tinge of impatience in his voice. 'There is very little freedom in this world, after all. It is a little hard, is it not, that some have to pay a lifelong penalty for some youthful error? but so it is.' He sighed, and drew Reggie between his knees ; and as the child looked up in his face, his expression softened. 'Never mind, Reg, old fellow, Freedom is a sweet sort of mistress ; but I would not take her in exchange for you.'

I thought it better to change the subject by saying I hoped the rain would soon be over, as Aunt Catherine would be getting anxious at my delay.

'Oh, I hope not,' he returned, going to the door ; 'you gave her anxiety enough the other evening. Miss Sefton is your aunt, is she not, Miss Leigh?'

He certainly looked mystified when I explained that she was no relation.

'But you call her Aunt Catherine,' he persisted.

'Oh, that is only our pet name for her. Jem calls her that, too. Jem is my brother, Mr. Fleming, and we both live with a married brother, who is a clergyman. Aunt Catherine—Miss Sefton I mean—is only a neighbour, and she lives with her sister, Mrs. Lyndhurst, at a beautiful place close by—Brookfield Hall. They are such dear creatures, the Ladies, as we call them, and we are so fond of them.'

'Yes, I see,' and his manner betrayed some interest ; 'these adopted relationships are often very close—sometimes as close as real flesh and blood ones. I knew of a case once——' then he stopped abruptly.

'You knew of a case once, Mr. Fleming?' I repeated, as a sort of encouragement to him to proceed, but he returned quickly :

'Oh, it is nothing ; it would not interest you in the least !'

'I believe you think nothing interests us,' I replied, rather piqued at this sudden reticence. 'I mean'—for he looked perplexed at this—'at least, Aunt Catherine says that she is sure you do not want to have anything to do with us ; that you would rather not, in fact.'

I blushed with annoyance the moment I made this impulsive speech. I could not think what made me say such a thing ; but somehow his manner provoked me so, it was so cool and guarded, just as though he were on his defence against us—as though we were his natural enemies. I am sure at that moment that I disliked him heartily.

To my surprise he answered me with the utmost gentleness.

'Why do you say that?' he replied, almost as though he were

speaking to Reggie. 'Why should you think me so ungrateful? It is not right to misjudge any one. What if I do not consider myself worthy of your acquaintance? What you think an unbecoming reserve may be only my way of showing my respect.'

'Mr. Fleming,' I stammered, 'is it because you are poor that you do not consider yourself our equal?'

Then he smiled.

'No, Miss Leigh; I am too much of a philosopher to fear comparison of that sort. My poverty is an extraneous circumstance that has nothing to do with me; but you are wrong. Though I do not seek acquaintance, I take a great deal of interest in the kind ladies who are so good to my boy. There, the rain is over. Do you think we may venture now?'

'Oh yes; I think so.'

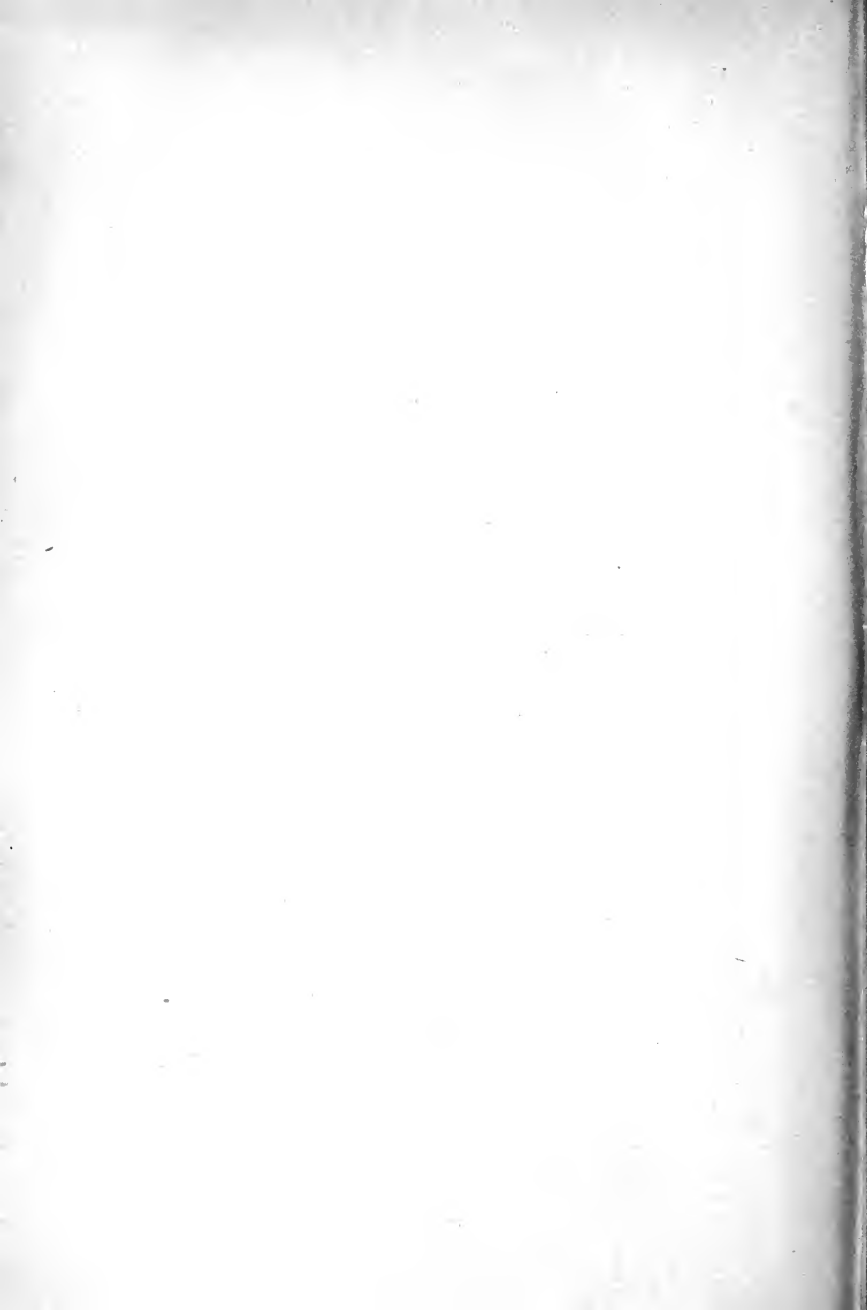
My cheeks were burning. How gently, yet with what dignity, he had rebuked my rudeness! He was not even vexed with me for my presumption. As we went out together, and he followed me up the little path between the dripping gorse-bushes, he talked in the pleasant way he had talked that evening; and when we parted at the door of La Maisonnette, he held out his hand for the first time.

'Good-bye, Miss Leigh,' he said, with a clear, open glance of amity. 'Please give my compliments to Miss Sefton;' and he looked so friendly that I ventured to say:

'I am afraid I have been very rude, Mr. Fleming. Please forgive me.'

'Why, what nonsense!' he said heartily. 'I have nothing in the least to forgive;' and then he shook hands with me again.

MISS SEFTON'S STORY



CHAPTER XVII

CATHERINE SEFTON'S RETROSPECT

'Seek not much rest, but much patience.'—THOMAS À KEMPIS.

'The graves grow thicker, and life's ways more bare,
As years and years go by ;
Nay ! thou hast more green gardens in thy care,
And more stars in thy sky.
Behind, hopes turned to griefs, and joys to memories,
Are fading out of sight ;
Before, pains changed to peace, and dreams to certainties,
Are glowing in God's light.'

Lyra Mystica.

THERE is one lesson that I think we all learn better as we grow older, and that is submission to the discipline of life.

Youth is slow to comprehend the inevitable laws that govern human existence. They turn away their eyes with natural reluctance from the dangers and pitfalls that threaten their future peace. To-morrow is not to-day ; the present, so joyous, so strewn with flowers—that is sufficient for these thoughtless minds. Age, with its sad environment, is still far away in the misty distance—away with all these prophets of evil. 'Let us eat and drink !' Oh yes ! is that not their light-hearted philosophy ?

I thank the Fatherly Wisdom above that such things should be—that these children just entering upon life are so mercifully blinded, so pathetically ignorant of the difficulties and sorrows that will beset their path later on. But with us who are older it is different. What woman of forty-five—yes, it is I, Catherine Sefton, who ask the question—what woman of forty-five can look back on the years of her life without a sigh of regret, without a repressed shiver, as the shadows of the past seem to unfold her ?

Ah! we know now what life means, as we look back over the years. There was work that we set about so gladly, so eagerly, and yet left unfinished; there were friendships that had been broken, promises unfulfilled, hopes that had been frustrated, good intentions that had come to an untimely end; those who had loved us had passed within the veil; others had disappointed us; where we had expected to find consolation we found vacancy. Who will not verify these words? Who has not experienced this bitter discipline? Is it not written in the good Book, that 'through much tribulation——'? Well, can we not finish that sentence for ourselves?

But I am no pessimist. Like other women, I have kept my journal of mercies: I have had my glad times—my golden opportunities. When joy fled, Peace—tender and abiding—has taken me by the hand and led me gently on. Would you know what she whispered to me at the hour of my greatest desolation—when I parted with the man whom I honoured above all men? 'It is but for a time. This life—this antechamber, where the grown-up children learn their lessons, where they do their painful tasks, where the problems they are studying are not clear to their comprehension—this is but the beginning—the childhood of life: beyond is the real life, where all shall be solved, and the parted shall be reunited for ever.'

I had had much to try me. When I was quite young the burden of a sister's wrecked happiness had been laid on me—the daily and hourly responsibility of helping a weak, morbid nature to bear a trouble that seemed too heavy for it. I take no credit to myself for this; many a woman has had a like burden, and has borne it far more bravely than I. I loved Virginia; she was my only sister; but I was not always patient with her. She had wrought her own woe. There were times when I would speak strongly to her of the duty of bearing more cheerfully the penalty of her own weakness. When I told her that no private grief should ever shadow the peace of a household, she would listen to me meekly. 'You are right, Cathy; you are always right,' that is what she would say to me. But the cloud never lifted; the next day it would be the same: the old sadness, the shrinking from strange faces, the want of interest, the self-absorbed, morbid depression; no, she could not help it, my poor Virginia; the poison had entered into her very being; her nature was not strong enough to rally; she was simply crushed.

Life could not be very gay at the Hall under these circumstances, but I had my own interests. I was proud of bearing an old and honoured name; the charge of our estates gave me

plenty of active work ; our tenants, the poor people round us, the ordering of our household, and the interchange of civility with our neighbours, filled up one busy day after another, and left me no time to think of my own happiness. If only Virginia would have worked too ! but she was too spiritless, too much unnerved by her unhealthy broodings ; after a time I had to leave her alone.

It has always been my opinion that a single woman should create her own interests and ties. I know that my affection for Olga brought much happiness into my life, and I grew almost to regard her as my adopted child ; Jem was very dear to me, too, but he was not Olga.

I never knew any girl like her ! She was not specially clever, nothing out of the common, but there was a freshness and sweetness about her, a sprightly sort of gentleness that entirely won my heart. Few young girls are restful. Olga was singularly so ; her nature had no abrupt angles ; there was a wonderful serenity about her ; she had no moods ; she was always just herself, simple, affectionate, unselfish.

I think the great secret of her charm lay in her complete unconsciousness ; she never seemed to be thinking of other people's opinion ; she wished to be loved, but she gave herself no uneasiness on the subject ; her affections were very strong ; she was capable of any amount of self-sacrifice for those she loved ! Perhaps her chief danger lay in her sympathy for others, her generosity often outstripped her prudence ; if she could help others, she was willing to run any risk herself.

I remember the little anecdote that Jem once told me of their childish days ; it was so characteristic of Olga : she was ready now to scorch herself in any good cause, to try her powers, to approach the impossible too closely ! I could fancy her still crying out with childish petulance, ' Oh ! Jem, it hurts ! ' for she was one who could suffer keenly. The one flaw in her character was a certain difficulty in understanding lower or more prosaic natures, in making allowances, in giving out her best to them ; and yet when she really loved any one it was marvellous how she overlooked their defects, how she gave them credit for fabulous virtues. I am thinking of Jem, who, after all, was not more romantic than other young men of his age.

But with poor Mr. Leigh it was different. Olga was never entirely just to him ; even Jem told her so. A certain slowness of comprehension, a tedious mannerism, a few surface faults, blinded her to his excellences. I never knew a better man ; as a clergyman, he was faultless, and his single-hearted loyalty to his

frail, worn wife was touching beyond measure. To borrow an oft-used expression, he simply worshipped the ground she walked on.

I used to scold Olga sometimes when I was in a lecturing mood. 'It is always Jem, Jem!' I said once, 'never Hubert; and yet what a good brother he is! Has he ever said a hard word to you?'

'No, never,' she replied quite meekly, for she knew she deserved my scolding.

'He is good as gold!' I went on; 'he never thinks of himself—you have often told me so; it is always his wife, or his children, or you, or Jem! he is so fond of you both, Olga.'

'Yes, I know,' looking very much ashamed of herself.

'And yet it is always Jem!—oh, I grant you Jem is charming; I like him better than any other young man of my acquaintance. He is a fine fellow—a very fine fellow—but he is not better than his elder brother.'

'Why should you compare them?' she asked reproachfully; 'they are totally different. Jem is Jem; and as for Hubert——'

'Well, what about Hubert?'

'Oh, he provokes me—he is so dense!—but, all the same, I am very fond of him. I am not like Kitty, perhaps, but, then, Kitty is his wife. If I had a husband I should swear by him, of course.'

And then the naughty child went off singing to herself, just as though I had made no impression on her; but I never lost an opportunity of speaking a good word for Mr. Leigh.

Virginia was very much attached to Olga—she always said that she was like a sunbeam in the house. Once or twice, when we were sitting together in the long winter evenings, she would drop some word about her that I found it difficult to answer.

'We are growing old, Cathy,' she said once; 'and if we should never find Basil'—and then she looked at me meaningly—'if we should have to seek for an heir—and we should have none of our own flesh and blood—then there is Olga.'

I remember the sudden pang I felt when she first said this, and how the blood seemed to rush to my heart for a moment. Had it come to this? were we so poor, so deprived of all natural ties, that we must leave a neighbour to inherit our lands? Must the Seftons die out? Were we two lonely women the last of our race?

'We must find Basil,' I returned; and in spite of myself my voice faltered.

But Virginia was in one of her dark moods.

'Basil may be dead,' she whispered; and I shrank a little at her tone. 'How can we find my boy if they have buried him out of sight? We are growing old, Catherine, and who is to live here in our stead? is it to be Jem or Olga?'

'It is to be neither,' I exclaimed; I know I answered her with a sort of impatience. 'How do we know Basil is dead? and the property is his. I will not lose the hope of finding him. You are his mother, Virginia; it is for you to hope too.'

'I think I am tired of hoping,' she returned, with a gentleness that simply exasperated me. 'I have hoped so long—and if he should be dead——'

I cannot explain how all this reiteration vexed me. It was only poor Virginia's way—her method of tormenting herself; but to-night it was simply unbearable. I flung away from the room as that last dreary sentence rang in my ears—'If he should be dead!'

Well, it might be so; Basil might be lying in his grave; but for all that, why should it be Olga—Olga, whom I so dearly loved, but who was not our own flesh and blood? We could remember her; oh yes, there were other ways of showing our affection—but what had she done that this rich inheritance should be hers? why should her simple, happy life be spoilt by all this weight and responsibility?

'It is not for Olga,' I said to myself; 'and yet to whom could it all go?' and as I asked the question, the thought flitted through my mind—a sudden memory of one who had been poor all his life, and had done good work with only a scanty reward; who had toiled and grown gray in his Master's service, without asking for His good things. Would not wealth be of infinite use to such a one?—a talent, a glorious talent, to be spent for others; would not hundreds be benefited, as well as he?

I went about with this thought locked up in my breast for many a day, but I never spoke of it to any one. Now and then Virginia would revert to the old subject—'If he should be dead,' but I always soothed her with the hope of a living Basil.

There was plenty of time; by and by, in a year or two, I might speak another name, that had not been mentioned between us for five-and-twenty years. Would Virginia think me mad? would she again plead Olga's cause? Time would show. Meanwhile the thought soothed me; perhaps one day it might all belong to Robert Fleming. It made me happier to think of this, and how he would care for all our poor people. Perhaps he might even take the name of Sefton, to please his long-lost friend.

I know few young persons would give a middle-aged woman credit for such romance ; but the heart is slow in growing old, and I had a tenacious memory. I could have married over and over again, but I had never seen a man to compare with Robert. 'If it be not Robert, it will be no one,' I had cried to my father with passionate girlish despair ; but he had answered with an incredulous smile. Well, I had been right—it was no one.

Sometimes, when Olga looked at me in the innocent way that was natural to her, my whole heart seemed to go out to the child, but, all the same, I would say to myself :

'I am not wronging her—there will be plenty for her and Jem. She will not misjudge me, because when I had the power to make her a rich woman I withheld my hand—because I selected a faithful steward, and kept it all for him.'

No ; I was not afraid of Olga. There was nothing mercenary in her nature ; she loved us and was grateful to us for our kindness, but no speculation on the future ever entered her thoughts.

I was in this unsettled state of mind when the report reached us of Paul Lyndhurst's death. It came to us in a strange round-about way, and was terribly vague and unsatisfactory. He had been dead for years, but no one knew of the fact but a certain Père Lefevre, one of the clergy of L'Eglise de St. Sulpice at St. Genette.

Our hopes of ever finding our rightful heir Basil had by this time ebbed very low indeed, but as this faint clue reached us, it was wonderful how they revived again. When Virginia looked in my face with yearning eyes, but without speaking, I knew what the words were that she left unuttered :

'You will go to St. Genette and see Père Lefevre. Perhaps on his deathbed Paul may have mentioned his son ;' and I answered as though she had really spoken :

'Yes ; I will go.'

In my own heart, I was glad that any action was possible ; all these years there had been nothing that I could do. How could I have left Virginia to search for Basil ? But now, when she bade me go, I could leave her with a clear conscience.

But I did not know what need there would be of patience, or of the long weeks of waiting that lay before us. At first I chafed sadly at the delay, but a letter from Virginia reassured me.

'Yes, it is hard,' she wrote ; 'but I am used to disappointment ; and you must not trouble so much about me. It is needless to say how I miss you—the faithful sister who has become a necessity to me ; but though the Hall is empty without you, Cathy, I would not have you back for worlds. Stay where you

are, and let us both try to be patient. You have Olga; the dear child will not let you be dull. No; you must not come back until you can bring me word that I am a free woman, and that Basil lives—ah! I dreamt of him last night: he held out his hand, and said “Mother,” and I woke weeping for the very sweetness of the dream.’

After this I banished all uneasy scruples, and tried to enjoy our pleasant unconventional life.

I began to love *La Maissonnette* almost as much as Olga did. I liked our cosy salon, and the great bare *salle-à-manger*, with its open glass doors and shady coolness. Sometimes, as we sat at our meals, the chickens would peck at the crumbs beside us; Rollo used to watch them furtively, and growl from time to time, but he never dared to chase them away—only Jeanne would come clattering over the floor, and drive them off with loud protestations.

‘One might as well dine in the poultry-yard!’ she would say, with a toss of her head, as one cackling chicken after another fled into the courtyard. ‘Poof! it makes one hot, too—the aggravating fowls!’

I must confess our neighbour at the pavilion interested me greatly, though I tried to hide this feeling from Olga. Indeed, it was for her sake solely that I did not make any overtures towards intimacy.

A girl is a serious responsibility, especially a warm-hearted, impulsive creature like Olga, who was capable of setting Mrs. Grundy at defiance if she could only perform a kind action to a fellow-creature. In spite of her innate refinement, one found it very difficult to make her understand the carefulness and discretion that are necessary in our intercourse with the other sex; her very innocence and kindness of heart made her bolder than other girls, and her unconsciousness added to the danger.

Judge my dismay, then, at finding an interesting young widower located at our very back-door—a widower, too, under very questionable circumstances, and evidently as poor as a church mouse. Unknown to Olga, I had questioned Monsieur Perrot about his lodger, but his replies had been very unsatisfactory.

‘Monsieur was poor, certainly; he had affirmed the fact. He (Monsieur Perrot) was standing one evening at his door talking to madame, and monsieur had addressed him. Madame wished to know how long ago? Well, perhaps a month or five weeks—a few days before madame had come to *La Maissonnette*.’

‘Not longer ago than that?’

‘Non, certainement; madame could verify the fact, for she came out and kissed *le petit*, who was asleep in monsieur’s arms. Madame thought it was his little brother, but monsieur only smiled

and shook his head. Then they had got into conversation, and monsieur stated that he was looking for a lodging—some quiet place that was not too dear. Monsieur owned his poverty frankly :

“I have only a little,” he said in a bright sort of way ; “when I have spent that, our holiday will be over. I want it to last as long as possible,” and then he had frowned as though some uneasy thought troubled him.’

‘And you offered him the pavilion, monsieur ?’

‘Well, it was madame’s thought,’ he returned, pushing his old blue velvet cap rakishly over one ear. ‘She had fallen in love with le petit, and, indeed, he was a little angel of beauty.’

“If one might put a few things in the pavilion,” she said, and monsieur had caught at the notion at once. It was dirty and full of litter ; but, all the same, nothing had suited him so well.

“It is a hermitage,” he cried—“a lodge in a garden of cucumbers. Look at that sunset—those windows looking out on the apple trees.” Ma foi, monsieur was easily contented. He and madame bargained over matters like two children—like chattering magpies. There must be a bed ; as for a bath, there was the bay ; but a table, above all some chairs, were necessary. A stove—good ; he would have excellent coffee. The bread and the milk for le petit—nothing was wanting. Dinner could be had at a restaurant. It would be a life after his own heart.

“Wake up, Reggie, and see thy new abode—the other edition of the old curiosity shop.”

‘Oh, it was droll to hear him, and to see le petit clap the hands !’

How interesting Olga would have found all this ! but I dared not tell her. I dared not excite her sympathy and pity by describing the poor fellow’s boyish transport at the sight of the bare-looking pavilion. There was a touch of poetry in those few words : ‘Look at that sunset’—as though he habitually lived above his surroundings.

‘We are ourselves in spite of our environment,’ he had said to me as we walked together that afternoon from the market-place.

I found it difficult to forget that talk. It was the conversation of a man who had thought much and suffered much, and whose faith in humanity had become impaired. Every now and then there was a bitter, half-mocking speech that jarred upon me, as though under the boyish manner there lurked a hidden depth and undercurrent. I hardly know how to describe the impression it made on me. I felt as though I must take his hand and beg him to be silent : ‘It is not so. There are yet good people in the world ; high aims, lofty principles. Throw away this black

pessimism, this garbage that no one wants, and open your eyes to the better side of life ;' but he was a stranger, and I could not say this.

He interested me profoundly. Indeed, he was never out of my thoughts ; but, all the same, he repelled me. The dark intent face and cold gray eyes haunted me. I used to ask myself curiously whether I liked or disliked him ; for a long time I could not answer this question. I used to be sorry when Olga met him. The night of the accident I had an uneasy feeling when I saw him with her.

'Will you take my boy ?' he had said to me quickly, almost peremptorily ; 'Miss Leigh has hurt her foot and is very faint ;' and then he had lifted her up as though she were as light as Reggie, and carried her into the house. 'She has been very brave, but the pain has been too much for her,' he said as he went to the sideboard for cold water.

It struck me then, from his manner, that he had been used to illness—he was so quiet and helpful.

But in spite of my old-maidish scruples, there was no keeping Olga and Reggie apart. The child had taken a fancy to her. Every day we heard his little voice shouting to us to open the gate ; and then he would come bounding through it, and fling himself into her arms. It was so pretty to see them together ; Olga had such gentle winning ways with children.

I am sure that it was his gentlemanly instinct that kept Mr. Fleming at a distance—how strange he should have that name !—for he was very grateful to us for our kindness to Reggie ; but, all the same, he did not wish for any intimacy. I have seen him avoid us more than once, or pass us with a bow, and I often begged Olga to be equally distant.

I was rather amazed, then, when I heard of the rencontre at the bathing-house ; and still more so when she repeated her impulsive speech.

'Why am I so foolishly outspoken, Aunt Catherine ?' she asked in quite a piteous voice. 'I mean to be so careful, and then the words somehow escape me. Jem is right—it is my own fault that I get into so many scrapes.'

'It is better to think before one speaks,' I replied with unusual severity ; but really the child had been so foolish.

To my dismay she suddenly burst into tears.

'Oh, I am so ashamed of myself !' she cried ; 'and you say nothing to comfort me. Mr. Fleming will think—oh ! I do not know what he will think ; but no one could have been kinder.'

'He will only think that you want to be friends ; your little

reproach meant nothing but that. Mr. Fleming is a man of the world; he will not misunderstand a little bit of girlish pique.'

'You are making it worse,' she returned; and I could see she was much put out. 'What business have I to wish to know any gentleman who shows so much reluctance to know me? My pride ought to have prevented me from making such a speech; but it was just his loneliness and unhappiness—oh, I am sure he is unhappy!—that made me long for us to be his friends. I thought how much good you might do him. But there, how often you have told me not to enact the part of Providence, and so I have brought this humiliation on myself.'

'But it is nothing—a mere nothing, my dear Olga. How can you exaggerate a few words?'

'It is not a mere nothing to be misunderstood,' she replied with much dignity. 'Aunt Catherine, why do you not comprehend my meaning? I am right to be angry with myself; I made a foolish speech to a stranger; I am glad I asked his pardon for my impertinence; I am glad he answered me so kindly. My one hope now is, that I may never have an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Fleming again;' and the dear child marched out of the room with her pretty little head as erect as possible.

Certainly I was right in saying Olga's impulsiveness would lead her into trouble. If Mr. Fleming had not been a gentleman—well, I know many a man would have taken advantage of that innocent little speech, and made it the basis for a lively flirtation.

CHAPTER XVIII

A STRANGE NIGHT

'Hast thou gone sadly through a dreary night,
And found no light ;
No guide, no star, to cheer thee through the plain—
No friend, save pain ?
Wait, and thy soul shall see, when most forlorn,
Rise a new morn.'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

THE next morning, as we were sitting over our breakfast and reading our letters, I noticed that Olga changed colour, and knit her brows as though something disturbed her.

'Is Jem treating you to one of his fraternal lectures ?' I asked, anxious to find out what was amiss.

'Jem writes rather strangely,' she replied in a very low voice. 'I think you had better read what he says ;' and she laid down the letter before me, and went on with her breakfast. And then she added, a moment later : 'You see, I have always been accustomed to tell Jem everything. I like him to know all about my friends, and every one ; he is so sensible and sympathetic. I never knew him take notions into his head before.'

I made no answer to this. Before I read a word I understood that Jem disliked the idea of our new acquaintance, and I was right. The passage Olga pointed out to me was as follows :

'And now I want to say a word to you, and I hope Aunt Catherine will excuse my interference. I think that you ought to be very careful before you pick up new acquaintances in that outlandish place. You are such a soft-hearted goose, Olga, and—begging her pardon—Aunt Catherine is not exactly what one would call a woman of the world'—what a rude boy !—'and I think you want some one to look after you both—you two poor unprotected

females! Now, I do not half like the idea of this fellow at the pavilion—what in the world is a pavilion?—he does not seem altogether square. I think you said his name was Fleming; try and find out his Christian name. There was a man of that name at Exeter—before my time, of course—who was the tip-top of all the riff-raff there, and who did not bear the best of characters. I think his name was Gerard, or Bertram; I can find out which. He was confoundedly clever, and all that—that kind of fellow always is—but he made a mess of his career by marrying beneath him. I think the girl was in some shop; but nobody knows exactly, only he vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up. Now, I don't say this man is your hermit of the pavilion, but it looks uncommonly like it, and if you will take my advice you will have very little to do with him. You may show this to Aunt Catherine if you like, for she is a sensible woman, and will not mind my taking the liberty of cautioning you both. Write again soon.

‘Your affectionate brother,

‘JEM.’

I hardly knew what to say as I handed the letter back to Olga. It had made me desperately uncomfortable. I did so hate suspecting people.

‘Jem may be right, you know; he is very sharp. He has all the makings of the future lawyer about him.’

To my alarm, Olga burst out with a passionate remonstrance.

‘I call that too bad, Aunt Catherine. You are condemning Mr. Fleming without proof, just because Jem chooses to interfere and make ridiculous statements. That is quite a version of “Give a dog a bad name, and hang him!”’

‘My dear Olga!’

‘Many young men have been wild at Oxford; but they have turned out very well for all that, and he may have repented of his follies. Why should we refuse to make any allowances for him?’

‘You think, then, that Jem’s Mr. Fleming is the same as ours?’

‘It looks very much like it,’ she returned reluctantly. ‘You surely remember, Aunt Catherine, that he told you that he had been at Exeter? I am afraid that corroborates it. He may even have married beneath him——’

She stopped and twisted her hands nervously together. It was a habit of hers when anything troubled her for which she could find no reason.

‘Well, my dear, will you not finish your sentence?’

'I hardly know how to explain my meaning. I am bitterly disappointed to think that Mr. Fleming could have contracted a low marriage—he seems too refined, too cultured altogether. But perhaps he was young, and the girl was pretty; anyhow, I think we ought to be sorry for him, for he must have had much to bear. Perhaps, after all, it is a good thing that his wife is dead.'

'I thought you would have judged him more severely.'

'I don't seem as though I could find it in my heart to be hard on him; he is too unhappy, Aunt Catherine. I am sure that he has repented and is sorry; perhaps that is what he meant about not being worthy of our friendship. He may hold himself aloof for that very reason, and I am to judge him harshly!'

'No, Olga, I did not say that; only the world will turn a cold shoulder on him. A gentleman has no right to marry beneath him. How can he expect his friends to be the same to him afterwards?'

'There may be justifying circumstances,' she returned firmly, 'or he might have been very young, Aunt Catherine. Jem may say what he likes; but he does not know Mr. Fleming. He has never seen him with Reggie; if he had, I don't think he would be quite so hard on him.'

'All the same, he has made me very uncomfortable.'

'That is so wrong of him; and, after all, we have found out nothing.'

'No, but we shall never feel quite easy until we know if Jem be right or not. Well, it is no use talking about it any more. Time will show, I suppose, whether Mr. Fleming is a desirable acquaintance. Jem will never rest until he has sifted matters—he will find out all about him, and then write to us again—and I suppose we must wait for that.'

'And until then you will keep him at a distance?'

'On the contrary, he keeps himself at a distance, but I shall certainly do my best to avoid him. I cannot help it, Olga,' as she looked at me reproachfully; for this was not her idea of fairness. 'Jem is right: we are two unprotected females, and must take care of ourselves; and, after all, Mr. Fleming may be a wolf in sheep's clothing.'

And then I carried away my letters, for what was the use of prolonging the argument? Olga never could be induced to speak severely of any sinner, however black he might be. To her sweet nature it was a sort of necessity to think the best of every one. She would even have been sorry for the poor wolf: he must have been so hungry before he had eaten the sheep, as she would have said. Olga went alone to the shore that morning, and after

luncheon we drove to St. Genette. Olga seemed a little tired on her return, and for a wonder betook herself to a couch in the salon ; but I heard her question Jeanne if Reggie had been to the little gate as usual.

Jeanne had replied, to her surprise, in the negative. Nothing had been seen of *le petit*. 'That is strange,' had been Olga's response ; 'Reggie has never failed me before ;' and then she had taken up her book and said nothing more.

As I was not tired, I went out into the garden and strolled about a little. I could not help feeling somewhat home-sick. I wished I were in the old English garden with Jasper spreading his tail on the mossy old sundial. The peaches and nectarines must be ripening on the sunny walls, and the flower-borders would be a glowing mass of colours. I wondered if Virginia were pacing the Lady's Walk as usual, with her pale, sad face turned to the sunset. I was so busy with these reflections that a slight sound near me quite startled me. To my surprise, and I may add annoyance, it was Mr. Fleming unlatching the little gate. I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw him deliberately unfasten it and come quickly towards me.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Sefton, for this intrusion,' he began hastily ; 'but I am in great anxiety about Reggie : he looks very ill, and I am going for the English doctor, if you will kindly tell me where he lives ?'

'Reggie ill ?' In a moment my brief annoyance vanished.

'Yes, and I do not know what is the matter with him. He has been very sick, and seems in a high fever. Will you tell me to whom I had better go ? There is no time to be lost, as he is all alone.' He looked at me wistfully and hesitated. But there was no need for him to say any more.

'That child alone ! I will go to him at once ; of course, I will stay with him while you are away.'

'Oh, how good you are !' he said earnestly, and I am sure there were tears in his eyes ; he seemed terribly agitated. 'I wanted to ask you, but I hardly dared to make such a request. I have locked him in, because he seems wandering a little ; but I could not bear leaving him alone, poor little chap ! But if you will stop with him——'

He did not wait to finish his sentence, but dashed up the steps and unlocked the door. I could hear Reggie's voice talking rather excitedly as I entered. But before looking at him, I gave Mr. Fleming the necessary directions. 'If Dr. Addison should be out, there is his partner, Mr. Dodd, in the Rue d'Accord ; they are both clever men,' I finished.

He nodded as though he understood me, and ran down the steps—and I was left alone with the boy. What a strange bare room! just as Olga described it; even the gray kitten was sitting on one of the steps leading to the loft. The windows were all closed, probably for safety, but I opened one of them; the close stove was alight, and a curiously-shaped vessel like a big coffee-pot with a black handle was on the top; I found it was full of hot water.

Reggie was tossing uncomfortably on his pillows; his dear little face was flushed, and his lips hot and dry; his beautiful eyes were wide open, and had the lustrous look of fever. He was chattering about 'a great big butterpie.' 'Isn't it a funny butterpie?' he asked when he saw me.

I knew very little about children's illnesses, but I guessed it was a sudden feverish attack; perhaps he had been running about too much in the sun, and had overheated himself, or he had taken something to disagree with him? I knew Wilfred had these sort of attacks, and often alarmed his parents; some children were always light-headed when they were unwell. I would not let myself be frightened, though he certainly looked very ill! The poor little creature seemed wretchedly uncomfortable; the bed-clothes were all in a heap. I was glad now of the hot water: I could sponge his face and hands, and give him a little warm milk and water to drink; then I removed the pillow and some of the outer coverings, and he seemed less restless.

It would be some time before the doctor could be here, and it was growing dusk. I had some difficulty in lighting a small lamp that stood on the writing-table; it had not been properly trimmed, and the flame was rather smoky. I placed it as far as possible from the bed, for it would never do to be left in darkness; but the smell of the paraffin oil was sickening, and the room looked bare and comfortless in that murky light. What a place for a delicate child! the floor had evidently not been swept for a week. I heard afterwards that Madame Perrot neglected her lodgers; and there were marks of dust on everything.

Reggie seemed quieter now, and lay babbling rather indistinctly of father and kitty. He seemed to like me beside him; once he thought I was Olga. 'Tell me about the howl, my Dear,' he whispered with confidential huskiness—'the howl what lived in the ivy-bush.' That hour seemed a very long one to me. Every now and then I went to the door to listen. How dark and quiet it looked outside—almost oppressively still! Our little grove seemed to shut out the outer world. Only once a sudden gleam shone through the foliage; it was a light from Olga's room—she

must be wondering at my long absence. The next minute it disappeared and all was dark again, and I went back to Reggie.

I was thankful when at last footsteps reached my ears, and the door in the wall was unlocked.

'It is Mr. Dodd. Dr. Addison is at St. Genette. Have I been very long?'

As Mr. Fleming put the question, he stooped down and looked at his boy, and I shook hands with the young doctor. I saw him cast a surprised look round the room; then his eyes rested on Mr. Fleming a moment. He was certainly a strange contrast to his surroundings; there was an indefinable air of refinement and culture about him, that would have struck even a stranger; even the way he walked across the room to fetch the smoky lamp was somehow different from the way other men walked; there was a free grace in every movement, an ease of bearing, a restrained strength, that was quite striking.

He held the lamp quietly while Mr. Dodd examined his little patient; nor did he speak except to answer his questions. I could not help admiring his power of repressing himself.

'Well, what do you think of him?' he asked, when the doctor had finished.

'I shall be able to tell you better to-morrow,' was the evasive answer.

'Is it anything infectious?'

'Oh no, not in the least. The child has been running about too much in the sun; he has overheated or over-excited himself. How long has he been ailing?'

'He did not seem quite himself yesterday—or was it the day before?—he complained of headache, and was rather drowsy. I kept him quiet, and then he seemed better.'

'He got a little wet in that shower yesterday, did he not, Mr. Fleming? I think Miss Leigh told me so.'

'Not very; do you think that mattered?' looking at the doctor anxiously. I fancied Mr. Dodd avoided his eye.

'One cannot tell; with these delicate children it does not take much to make them ill. I should say that he has been ailing for a day or two. You must keep him very quiet, and follow my directions. His hair is too long; we must alter that.'

'Do you mean it must be cut off?' and the poor young fellow turned exceedingly pale.

'Oh, I daresay Miss Sefton will see to that,' in an off-hand way that deceived neither of us. 'Now, are you going back with me in the carriage? There will be medicine and ice required; and

you had better bring some Liebig's essence back with you. Who is going to attend to my orders?'

'You may give them to me, Mr. Dodd;' and I signed to him to follow me to the other side of the room. We spoke in the lowest possible tones. I could see Mr. Fleming was straining his ears to catch what we said, but he could not hear a word.

'Is it only a simple feverish attack?'

'I can hardly tell you to-night; it is more the brain. I should say the child has the most delicate organisation; he has evidently one of those sensitive, highly-wrought natures that are liable to this form of illness; there is need for great care. You will be with him to-night?'

'Yes, of course; there is no one else to nurse him. But, Mr. Dodd, do you think he could be moved close by—to La Maisonnette?'

'To-night?—no, certainly not; you must keep him where he is; it is not very comfortable, but it is cool and airy;' and then he proceeded to give me all directions, while Mr. Fleming looked at us wistfully; but he did not interfere, only, as Mr. Dodd repeated once more, 'His hair is too long and thick; if you have scissors by you, I should advise you to cut it rather closely,' I saw him fingering the rough locks, as though he were loath to part with them; and as he did so, his lips were pressed tightly together, as though in intolerable pain.

As they went through the door in the wall, I stood for an instant looking out into the dark garden. As I did so, I caught a faint gleam of whiteness in the distance. If it should be Olga looking for me, for she was wearing a white gown this evening! With a sudden longing that it should be so I leaned over the parapet, and called her name. To my relief, she instantly responded, and I could hear her fumbling at the gate.

'Where are you, Aunt Catherine?'

'Here at the pavilion!'

Then I could hear her running down the gravel path, and in a minute she was beside me.

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, it is I who have been frightened this evening! We have been looking for you everywhere, and then I thought I heard your voice. But why are you here?'

'Hush, you must not speak so loud; Reggie is ill, and his father is just going back with the doctor to fetch the medicine. I have promised to stay with him to-night. But, Olga, I am so thankful you have come; there are so many things I want that Jeanne must bring me. Mr. Fleming will be away an hour, and

I must put things a little comfortable before his return. I must have another lamp, not this smoky thing.'

I was holding the door as I spoke, but now she put her hand over mine as though to open it.

'Tell me that presently. I must see Reggie first,' and as I yielded to the strong girlish pressure, she crossed the room and knelt down by the bed. 'Oh, my darling, how ill he looks !' and she lifted the little hands to her lips.

Reggie seemed to recognise her voice ; for he smiled and muttered drowsily : 'She was so pretty and fluffy, my Dear, and had such nice yellow eyes.'

Olga's eyes were full of tears as she listened to him ; but there was no time to be lost on mere sentiment. In a moment the dear girl was as prompt and full of resources as ever. I saw her looking round the room quickly, as though to note its deficiencies.

'I must have a lamp, Olga—that one with the soft pretty shade ; and my work-basket, and some of those fine towels, and a napkin or two, and a duster, and——'

'Oh, there will be more than that required,' she returned quietly ; 'I must bring Jeanne to help me. You must have an easy-chair if you are to sit up all night, and you have had no supper, and Jeanne must make you some coffee. Don't trouble yourself, Aunt Catherine ; I will see to all that, and you must take care of Reggie.'

And without trusting herself to look at him again, she gave me a little reassuring nod and went away, but I followed her to whisper outside :

'You will not let Jeanne make a noise.'

'She shall not come farther than the steps. I will bring everything myself. Oh, you may trust me, dear !'

And she sent me back to my watch with the comforting thought that I had a faithful helper outside.

I am afraid to say how many journeys those two women performed between La Maisonnette and the pavilion during the next half-hour. Every few minutes I heard faint sounds at the bottom of the steps, and then Olga would enter, noiselessly carrying in one thing after another in her strong young arms, and quite regardless of her own fatigue. I do not think I ever admired her as I did that night. She was so quiet, so helpful, so full of thought for me. The easy-chair was placed by the bed, and a slip of carpet and a footstool put near it. The smoky lamp was carried away, and our pretty shaded one placed in its stead. Then, to my surprise, another easy-chair was put near the writing-table. 'It is for Mr. Fleming ; he will be so tired,' she whispered.

Only once I saw her linger over her task ; it was when she saw me beginning to cut off Reggie's thick locks.

'Oh, must you do that?' she said with a little sob, and the tears were running down her cheeks as she went out. But it was not long before she came back ; this time she carried a tray covered with a napkin. 'It is your supper and his,' she said softly. 'I am going to bring you some coffee, and then there is nothing else I can do. It is growing late, and Jeanne is tired and wants to shut up.'

'My dear, you have done such wonders,' and I kissed her and wished her good-night.

She had only just gone when I heard the latch of the door lifted, and Mr. Fleming entered. I saw him give a dazed sort of look at the room, as though he did not recognise it. I daresay he wondered what magician's wand had been at work during his absence. The soft shaded light, the easy-chairs, the tempting meal on the table, the steaming coffee-pot, must each have been a mystery to him ; but tired and jaded as he was, he was in no mood for comfort. On the contrary, he helped me to apply the ice to Reggie's head and give him his medicine, waiting upon me in a way that made me think again that he must have been used to illness. The ingenious manner in which he constructed a screen with a couple of chairs and the quilt so as to shield Reggie from the light proved him ready with resources. It was not until there was nothing more to be done that I saw him throw himself into a chair as though he were exhausted ; and no wonder, for he had tramped miles that day.

I poured him out some coffee, and putting some sandwiches on a plate, placed the food at his elbow ; but he was lying back in his chair with closed eyes and took no notice. He looked frightfully pale, and his hair was damp and matted on his temples ; most likely he had eaten nothing all day. I touched him gently to rouse him. He opened his eyes ; their look of misery was almost more than I could bear ; but he only shook his head when I begged him to eat.

'I cannot—it is impossible!' was his answer ; and then he closed his eyes again with a groan.

He wanted me to go away and leave him, but I dared not. Poor fellow!—he looked little more than a boy in that light—he was utterly spent with grief and inanition : the sight of the little cropped head on the pillow had turned him sick.

I must do him good in spite of himself. Why need I mind him? he was only Basil's age, and I was old enough to be his mother.

'Mr. Fleming,' I said gently, 'you must drink this coffee, and,

pardon me, you must eat. How are you to help me nurse Reggie if you give way like this?' and as he made no answer, I put my arm under his head, and held the cup to his lips as though he were Reggie. 'Now drink, please;' and to my relief he obeyed me.

Most likely the first taste was like a cordial to him, for he finished it almost at a draught; then I put a sandwich in his hand: 'Now eat that, and I will bring you some more coffee. Tell me truly—you have eaten nothing to-day?'

'Yes; I had some bread: that was all there was in the house. I could not leave Reggie to get anything else. May I have some more coffee? it is delicious.'

'Yes; but you must finish all those sandwiches.' But I had no need to urge him: the craving for food had returned, and he ate what I had placed before him as though he were famished; but when he had finished he pushed away the plate with a gesture of disgust.

'Isn't it horrid to think I can eat, with him lying there! Miss Sefton, you are an angel of goodness to me to-night! Tell me, do you think my boy is in danger?'

He took my hand as he spoke; his were hot and trembling.

'How can I tell?' I faltered. 'He is very ill; and, indeed, I must go back to him. There is great need for care—Mr. Dodd said so; but he is no worse—I think he is even quieter.'

He drew a long breath, and then looked at me rather strangely.

'If he should get worse, would you promise to tell me?'

'Yes; I will ask Mr. Dodd to do so.'

'You must keep your promise, for a good deal depends on it. He will not get worse, dear little chap, will he? Only—only, you know, in that case I must tell his mother.'

His mother! Was he wandering? had anxiety about Reggie been too much for him?

'Yes, I must tell Aline—I mean, I must tell my wife. She is in England;' and when he had said this he raised himself with difficulty, and went to look at Reggie.

CHAPTER XIX

‘HE IS EVERYTHING TO ME’

‘With patience to endure our griefs we learn not soon,
But how much later still to take them as a boon?’

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

‘Thou who art
So happy in Thy heaven away,
Take not mine only bliss away!’

MRS. BROWNING.

I WENT back to my little patient. Reggie was moaning, and seemed restless and ill at ease; but after a time he quieted down again into the same drowsy state. I sat beside him silently, holding the hot tiny hand in mine; there was so little one could do. Now and then a shiver passed over me as I thought of Mr. Fleming’s words.

Jem was right, after all; there was need indeed to be careful. What would Olga say? How would she be able to defend Mr. Fleming now? She had pitied him, in her simplicity, thinking him a heartbroken widower; how would she receive the astounding intelligence that his wife was really alive and in England—that Reggie had a mother? Would she not be shocked by his reticence, his seeming indifference? Would she not ask, as I was questioning myself now, what it could all mean?

And yet there might be some explanation possible, some satisfactory solution of the mystery. He might have come over to St. Croix on Reggie’s account. Perhaps he was too poor to bring his wife too; she might be delicate—an invalid. Only the strongest necessity would induce him to alarm her by the account of Reggie’s illness; it was his care, his thoughtfulness for this wife of his—this Aline—not his indifference, that had prompted his silence.

All these suggestions were plausible enough, then why did I not believe them? Why did I instinctively refuse to acknowledge them, while a growing distrust and uneasiness seized me?

‘Mr. Fleming is a perfect stranger to us,’ so the inward argument went on; ‘he is a proud, reserved man. Is such an one likely to speak of his family affairs? How was he to read our thoughts, or to know that we had imagined him a widower? Such an idea may have never entered his head. This is not the reason why he has kept himself so aloof, and made no response to our friendly overtures;’ and so on.

I could not refute these arguments; but a woman judges by instinct, and in my inmost heart I felt that Jem’s story was true. Mr. Fleming was evidently a dissatisfied, unhappy man. That this unhappiness was connected in some way with his married life I was now as convinced as though the evidence were before my eyes. He had married beneath him, and he was now ashamed of the woman he had made his wife. Perhaps they were separated! And Olga had been thrown into the company of this man! No wonder her young guardian, Jem, was up in arms. What would Mr. Leigh say? My responsibility weighed heavy on me that night. How was I to behave in future to this poor wolf in sheep’s clothing? How was I to keep him and Olga apart, and yet do my duty to this worse than motherless child—this little innocent being who was perhaps made the scapegoat of his parents’ transgressions? And as I asked myself these perplexing questions I involuntarily raised my eyes. Mr. Fleming was watching me, as though he read my thoughts; his face had grown paler and more haggard. His fixed, miserable glance gave me a shock.

‘Do not be hard upon me; you do not know it all.’ That was what his eyes seemed to say to me. Poor boy! he was so young—only Basil’s age, if Basil was living. How was one to judge him severely? That tired, sad young face seemed to appeal strangely to me.

The next minute I rose softly, and taking up the strip of soft carpet Olga had put for my use, I spread it beside him with a hassock and Reggie’s rejected pillow. He looked at me with a bewildered air, as though he did not understand what I was doing. I put my hand on his shoulder:

‘You are worn out,’ I said gently; ‘this is the only couch I can contrive for you. You must lie down and try to sleep. I will promise to wake you if there be anything for you to do; and’—as he hesitated—‘you will be able to help me more to-morrow if you sleep now.’

‘Do you really mean it?’ he asked under his breath.

‘Yes; please do not keep me waiting. I want to cover you with this’—pointing to a wrap in my hand. ‘This place is very draughty.’

And then his weariness was so great he resisted no longer. As I stooped to adjust the covering he arrested my hand and carried it to his lips.

'Oh, how good you are! I never knew any one so good! I do not deserve it.'

But almost before I left him his eyes closed and he was asleep. Once or twice during the night I looked at him as I passed to and fro on some errand; he was sleeping soundly, his head pillowed on one arm, the other stretched on the rug that covered him. There was something boyish in his attitude; his face looked calm and happy, as though some peaceful dream had beguiled him. There were no lines now in the broad, open forehead; the smooth, dark face was at rest. The firm lips had relaxed into a half-smile. Only once, when the dawn felt chilly and I put a shawl over him, he stirred and frowned.

'Don't, Aline; it hurts—it hurts dreadfully!' I heard him mutter, as he flung away from me.

During the hours that followed I had plenty of time for reflection. I could make my plans for the morrow undisturbed. After all, there was a way out of my perplexity. Olga must be made to understand that any intercourse with Mr. Fleming must be forbidden for the future. Only on this understanding could I retain my present post. She was so unselfish she would not refuse, for Reggie's sake. If Olga were only off my mind, I felt I could devote myself gladly to the service of these two helpless beings—for a man is generally helpless in some degree in a sick-room, unless he is especially fitted by nature for a nurse.

Mr. Fleming was not without resources. He was helpful and self-reliant, but his anxiety for his child unmanned him. I knew that for his boy's good he would allow himself to be guided and advised; his very gratitude would make him pliable in my hands. No, I must not disquiet myself any more; with a little tact and discrimination I should be able to steer through my difficulties.

I was so sure, too, that Olga's good sense would aid me—the dear child had never yet disappointed me.

The longest night must have an end, and by and by I saw the gray dawn creeping through the uncurtained window; there were faint streaks of light across the sky; the birds began to twitter. The coming day was heralded by numerous voices—by the crowing of cocks from the poultry-yards; by the faint bleating of sheep. The sun was rising, and soon the happy, waking earth would be bathed in his golden radiance. It was still so early, that I was surprised to hear footsteps approaching. They were not Jeanne's

sabots clattering up the steps ; that light tread could only belong to Olga.

The next instant there was a gentle knock, the door was softly opened, and my dear girl entered, looking a little pale and anxious, as though she had not rested as well as usual, and laden with a heavy tray that she had carried all the way from *La Maissonnette*.

'I thought you would like your breakfast early,' she whispered in my ear ; 'so, as I was awake, I would not trouble Jeanne. How is he, Aunt Catherine ?'

'I do not quite know, my dear. He does not seem worse ; but it is for the doctor to tell us.'

'Oh, he is not worse, I can see it ; I am sure of it,' she returned, kneeling down by the bed and kissing him softly. 'Oh, my darling ! how sweet he looks ! but I am so sorry his pretty hair has been touched.'

'Hush, Olga !' for she had not perceived Mr. Fleming, and he was now awake and watching us. 'My dear, will you go away now and come to me presently ?' and she understood me in a moment and rose at once—a hint was always enough for Olga. She did not look beyond the bed, but only said quietly :

'Yes, I will see you by and by. Please take your breakfast, Aunt Catherine ;' and then she went away softly.

I looked at the meal her loving hands had prepared. There was a little brown teapot for me ; a tiny coffee-pot, that was evidently intended for Mr. Fleming ; a pile of crisp, delicious-looking toast ; some new-laid eggs ; a pat of fresh, golden butter. All served so daintily ! I could see Mr. Fleming was looking at it too.'

'This is your breakfast as well as mine,' I said with a smile.

'May I have it presently ?' he returned quite humbly, as though he were asking a favour. 'I must go down to the bay and have a dip first. I could not sit down like this,' with a shrug, as though he were conscious of his jaded appearance.

'The stove is still warm ; it will heat your coffee. Yes, go ; it will do you good ;' but he lingered to look at Reggie and question me.

'She did not think that he looked any worse.'

'Who ? oh, you mean Miss Leigh. No, I do not think he is worse this morning. Indeed, he seems rather easier.'

'If he should get well, it will be you who will have saved him,' he replied in a voice of intense emotion ; 'what shall I not owe you—if—if——' he stopped as though unable to say another word.

'Please do not say any more ; we cannot tell. It is in God's hands, not mine. Look what a lovely morning it is !'

'I am keeping you from your breakfast, and you look so tired,' he returned remorsefully; 'I will go,' and he hurried away.

Five minutes later Olga's soft footsteps returned again.

'He has gone to bathe,' she said eagerly; 'I saw him pass with his towels. So we are safe for some time. Let me pour out your tea, Aunt Catherine, and then I must put things a little comfortable for you both.'

She was running away, but I held her fast.

'Olga, my dear, I want to speak to you. I had rather a shock last night. Mr. Fleming—oh, I don't want to speak against him, poor fellow! but he is not what we thought him—not a widower. His wife is living; she is in England.'

I fancied she turned a shade paler in her surprise; but she answered me very quietly:

'I am glad that he told you. It is better to know the truth about people!'

'Yes, and Jem must have been right in what he wrote.'

'Very probably,' but there was no indignation in her clear tones; 'it was stupid of me to get that idea into my head; but I certainly thought his wife was dead. Did he say anything about her, Aunt Catherine?'

'Not a word—only that he must tell her if Reggie got worse. Olga, I fear there must be something very wrong. It makes me uneasy that you should be with him.'

'It is not our affair,' she returned quickly; 'his wife has nothing to do with us. It is only Reggie who concerns us. You will not forsake him, surely?'

'Not if—if—you will promise——'

'There is nothing for me to promise,' she replied with a touch of impatience in her voice; 'it is not I who am nursing Reggie; it is only you, Aunt Catherine.'

'Yes; but, my dear, do you not see my difficulty? Last night Mr. Fleming slept upon the floor, and when to-night comes, what am I to do with him? and there is no other room than this, and you and Jeanne are alone at La Maissonnette?'

'But I shall not be there to-night,' she returned, as though a bright idea struck her. 'Listen to me, dear—to-night you shall lie down, and I will watch Reggie. There is the big couch in the drawing-room that can be brought over to the pavilion, and you shall rest, and I will call you from time to time.'

'And Mr. Fleming?'

'Oh, there is the room at the end of the passage,' she answered in an off-hand manner. 'Jeanne shall get it ready for him, and he shall have his supper and breakfast in the *salle-à-manger*; and

Jeanne will wait on him : is it not an excellent idea ? But we must not talk any more—your tea is getting cold, and I want to do a little dusting before he returns. Do you see this red sash, Aunt Catherine ? when he goes out and you want me, you must fasten this to the railing at the top of the steps, and when I come to the little gate I shall see it ; it is to be our signal to each other. There, I have arranged it all, and there is nothing to say more !’ and she moved away quietly and began to put things in order, arranging the books in neat piles, and removing the lamp ; but she had not been long at work before the door in the wall was unlatched, and Mr. Fleming re-entered, looking all the fresher for his bath. Olga left off at once and shook hands with him. ‘I am sure Reggie looks a little better,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Aunt Catherine has finished her breakfast ; you must have yours now ;’ and she went out, carrying the lamp with her. I saw a strange, undefinable expression flit across Mr. Fleming’s face as he closed the door after her ; perhaps those few words cheered him, for he seemed to enjoy his breakfast, although directly he had finished he seemed so restless that I recommended him to stroll up and down the garden until Mr. Dodd arrived.

‘Do I fidget you ?’ he asked penitently. ‘I am afraid you want to get rid of me. If I could only control this restlessness !’

‘You will walk it off,’ was my reply ; and to my relief he took my advice. I suppose Olga saw him marching up and down the little path, for she never came near us.

Mr. Dodd’s report was hardly as satisfactory as I had expected ; his manner was guarded and he spoke vaguely.

‘Oh no, our little patient is no worse,’ he said in answer to the father’s anxious questioning ; ‘indeed, I trust he is going on fairly well ; but there is little change, and we cannot be too careful. A great deal depends on the nursing ;’ and here he looked at me.

I saw at once that he would not speak out plainly before Mr. Fleming ; so I begged the latter to leave us for a few minutes, and he obeyed me rather reluctantly.

‘Now, Mr. Dodd,’ I began as he closed the door, ‘you may speak to me as openly as you wish.’

‘I do not want to alarm you,’ he replied cautiously ; ‘but the child is very ill, and one can never tell in these cases.’

‘You do not find any improvement, then ?’

‘No material improvement—certainly not.’

‘And we must not move him ?’

‘On no account ; he will do very well where he is—this room is cool and airy ; and as far as quietness goes it might be a

hermitage ; but I suppose,' looking at me inquiringly, 'there is very little accommodation ? still, La Maissonnette is so close.'

'Oh, we can manage !' for it was no use taking a stranger into confidence. And, after all, Olga's plan could be tried ; so, after giving me a few more directions and promising to call in the evening, Mr. Dodd took his leave. He was young ; but his manner gave me confidence, and I had heard from the Milners that he was considered extremely clever.

After our early luncheon was over, I wrote out rather a long list of things that I required from the town. There was money to be changed at the bank, and various commissions to be executed. Mr. Fleming undertook them cheerfully. I could see that he was sanguine about Reggie ; he thought Mr. Dodd had not spoken quite so gravely, and, of course, I did not undeceive him. The long walk would be good for him, and he would have the pleasure of feeling himself of use, besides which, his absence for an hour or two would enable us to make arrangements for the night. There was much to be done ; the pavilion was pleasant enough by day, but it was decidedly cold and cheerless by night. Directly Mr. Fleming had started for St. Croix, I hung out the red signal, and after a little delay Olga came. I set her and Jeanne to work, and in about an hour we had made things more comfortable. The big couch with pillows and quilt was placed ready for the night, and a Japanese screen round it. Some more strips of carpet were laid over the boards, the newly-trimmed lamp brought back, and Jeanne had actually washed the floor over, and Olga had placed a great bowl of roses on the writing-table before Mr. Fleming returned.

He came in hot and dusty, and paused a moment on the threshold. Olga had her back turned to the door, and did not see him ; she was arranging the little tea-table. She wore a coarse bib-apron over her pretty summer gown, and had pinned a handkerchief over her brown hair to protect her from the dust. Mr. Fleming did not seem to recognise her. I saw him put up his arm to shield his eyes, as though the sunshine dazzled him. She started and coloured a little when she turned round and saw him, but did not speak. When she had left the room, Mr. Fleming came close to me.

'Miss Sefton,' he said hurriedly, as though he were agitated, 'please do not let Miss Leigh work in the way she is doing ; it pains me excessively to see it ; it is not right. I have strong arms. I am not useless. There is nothing I will not do if you will only tell me how I may be of service. It is not for Miss Leigh, it is for me, to work.'

I looked up into the young determined face. In my heart I

admired the proud independence that refused a girl's services. Unwittingly he had played into my hands.

'Will you really promise to do as I wish?'

'Try me!' was the eager answer; and a wonderful softness came into his gray eyes.

Oh, if he had only been Basil, I felt then that I could have loved him!

'You are very good,' I returned quietly; and then I explained to him the arrangements we had made for the night.

To my dismay, he turned very pale, and looked exceedingly unhappy.

'Oh, you will not do that?' he said piteously; 'you will never ask me to leave him? I would do anything else. I will sit up all night, or there is the loft. I would lie down on a heap of shavings—anything—anything—so that I may be near him!'

'But, Mr. Fleming—'

'Oh, you don't know what he is to me!' he interrupted. 'If he should die, I should just go and hang or drown myself. I could not live without my boy; baby as he is, he is everything to me.'

The tears came into my eyes to hear him talk like that, poor fellow! and for his own sake I must be firm. I took his hand—it was clenched, and felt like iron—and I spoke to him as though I were his mother.

'My dear,' I said, 'you must not talk so; you have been very good and patient. No one could have behaved better; but you must trust me—a little. I am very tired, for I did not close my eyes last night, and if Olga will sit beside Reggie I shall be able to sleep.'

'It will be all the same,' he urged eagerly; 'you can rest there behind that screen, and I will promise not to take my eyes off him. Do you think I cannot keep awake as well as Miss Leigh? And it is my own boy who is lying there!'

I shook my head. He was making it very difficult for me, and yet I would not give it up. I knew that there would be no rest for me under such circumstances. He would not know how to manage Reggie, and I should spend the night in watching them both.

He looked at me in his keen way.

'This does not please you; you want me to go away!'

'Yes, for this one night. It will be better. I would not propose it if I did not know it would be for the best. Mr. Fleming, you must not think me cruel. If Reggie be worse—if there be any change, I mean—I will promise that you shall be

called at once. If you leave your window open, there will be no difficulty. Either Olga or I will come. Can you not trust me this once?'

He did not answer for a moment, and then he said in a hasty tone:

'Yes, I can trust you; but it is long since I have said that to any woman; but, remember, it will be with my all. Very well, I will go; send me away when you wish;' and then he went back to Reggie; but it wrung my heart to see him sitting there with his head buried in his hands. Ah me, that the love for a little child should be so great, and yet there are many of us who doubt the Fatherhood of God!

It was late, nearly ten o'clock, before I asked him to withdraw. He had not once moved or spoken; but at my first whisper he rose at once, and, with one long look at his boy, went out on the steps, where Jeanne and her lantern were waiting for him. I could not let him go like that, and followed him out.

'Mr. Fleming, you will try to sleep? I may need you to-morrow.'

'Oh yes, I shall try,' he replied in a weary tone.

'You do not know how grateful I am to you for this complaisance with my wishes.'

'I would rather you had told me to lie down on these stones; may I'—with a sudden change of tone—'may I stop outside here?'

'And lay up rheumatism for life! No, certainly not, and there is a comfortable bed ready for you. Come, Jeanne, I entrust monsieur to your care; make him comfortable. Good-night, Mr. Fleming; God will watch over Reggie as well as though you were beside him. You must trust your boy to Him;' but I must confess that I felt a sad choking sensation in my throat as I watched him walking with bent head, as though he hardly knew where he was going. Once I saw Jeanne catch hold of his arm as though he were stumbling.

Olga was sitting beside Reggie, and looked wakeful and vigilant. There was no need for any words between us, and I threw myself heavily on the couch, and was soon asleep. Two or three times that night Olga roused me, but I always resumed my interrupted nap.

I woke at last of my own accord, and peeped round the screen. The gray dawn was just breaking, but the lamp was still alight. To my surprise, Olga had quitted her post. I thought I heard her voice speaking to some one outside; the next minute she re-entered.

'Were you speaking to Mr. Fleming, Olga?'

'Yes; this is the second time he has come.'

'He has not slept, then?'

'Yes, during the earlier part of the night; but towards morning he got restless. I have sent him away happier this time, Aunt Catherine. I do believe Reggie is a little better—that Mr. Dodd will say so.'

I thought so, too, as I looked at him, and in our joy and relief we kissed each other, and Olga cried a little.

'Oh, he is such a darling!' she said; 'I think it would break my heart if we were to lose him. I do not believe I have ever liked any other child in quite the same way;' and I understood her. The little creature had certainly found his way to our hearts in the most singular manner.

'And now, Aunt Catherine,' she continued in a different voice, 'what are we to do about breakfast?'

'Are you very tired, Olga?'

'Not so very tired,' was the brisk reply; 'but I shall have a nap presently.'

'Then in that case I will leave you in charge for an hour, while I change my things and refresh myself. Shall you be afraid to be left, Olga?'

'Not a bit! you must stay and have breakfast with Mr. Fleming. Yes, that will be best, Aunt Catherine.'

I knew I could trust her, and there was nothing to be done for Reggie; so I went back to La Maissonnette. Jeanne was in the *salle-à-manger*, and I begged her to prepare an early breakfast. Just as I was sitting down to the table, Mr. Fleming came in, evidently from another dip in the bay, for he had his towels over his arm; he looked very pleased to see me.

'Reggie is better!' he said eagerly. 'Miss Leigh is sure of it.'

'Yes, I think so, I hope so! We shall see what Mr. Dodd says;' and then I added reproachfully: 'After all, you have not slept.'

'Oh yes, I have!' he returned in a boyish sort of way; 'and the bed was so comfortable! I slept quite two hours, and then I got up and dressed, and went over to the pavilion; Miss Leigh heard me, and came out.'

'Yes, I know.'

'I went back again and had another nap; but somehow I could not get the dear little chap out of my thoughts, and I was obliged to run across again. I am afraid Miss Leigh must have thought me a bore.'

'I am afraid so too.'

He gave an odd little laugh at that, and then said rather unsteadily :

'Don't chaff me, please ; of course I behaved like an ass last night ; but if you knew what it cost me to obey you !'

'I do know.'

'And yet you asked me to go ! Never mind, I am too happy to reproach you. Well, it was the hardest bit of work I ever did in my life ; but all the same I did it.' And then a curious change came over his face, and he walked away to the window. 'If Reggie be really better,' he said as he stood there, 'there will be no need to tell Aline ; we shall not be here much longer.'

'Do you not think that in any case his mother ought to know ?' I asked cautiously.

'No, I think not,' was the hesitating answer ; 'there are mothers *and* mothers. Aline is not one of the anxious sort.' And with this vague response he whistled to Rollo, and went out into the garden until I had finished my breakfast.

CHAPTER XX

LOOKING AT THE SUNSET

'Oh, the moorland by the sea ! The red sun in gallant splendour
Drops his morning kiss upon it, ere he goeth on his way,
Or athwart its gold and purple steals a benediction tender,
Ere night's starry curtains shroud him at the dewy close of day.'

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

I WAS much comforted to find that Mr. Dodd endorsed our favourable opinion of Reggie. The child was going on well, he said—much better than he had ventured to hope ; there had been a change for the better in the night, and though there was still the same care required, he trusted there would be no relapse. I told him how we had managed for the night, and the hard work I had had with Mr. Fleming. I thought he seemed much interested.

'You were perfectly right,' he said ; 'you have saved yourself wisely for to-night ; you could not possibly have done otherwise. Mr. Fleming will be reasonable enough to own this.'

'He could not have kept awake,' I replied ; 'he was so worn-out with anxiety, and I should have been watching them both all night.'

'Yes, I understand ; get him over to La Maissonnette again to-night, if you like. I cannot dispense with my head-nurse yet.' Mr. Dodd and I understood each other perfectly. I overheard him afterwards talking to Mr. Fleming on the steps.

'Leave it all to the ladies,' he was saying. 'Miss Sefton is an excellent nurse ; you are perfectly safe in her hands. The boy is doing very well ; and with such scanty accommodation——'

'Oh, I do not mind about to-night !' replied Mr. Fleming in his eager way, without letting the doctor finish. 'They may send me where they like, but last night it was different. Doctor,' dropping his voice, 'I give you my word I would rather have cut my throat than have had to go off and leave that little chap ; and

yet, when she told me to go, I was obliged to obey her. She is a woman one must obey somehow ; I never knew any one like her.'

'Oh yes, I know what you mean ; and she is a capital nurse, too. Very well, I shall look in again this evening. Can I take you down to the town, Mr. Fleming ? It will be a little distraction, and you will be out of the way.'

I think this latter argument prevailed ; for Mr. Fleming let himself be carried off as quietly as a lamb. Olga went back to La Maisonnette for a couple of hours, and I was left alone with my little charge.

Oh, the stillness of that noontide watch ! I had to shake off drowsiness once or twice by walking to the open window. Outside the sunshine was blazing ; white butterflies, Reggie's favourite playfellows, were fluttering hither and thither ; the low apple trees were bending under their load ; some bees were returning laden with honey from the fields of clover ; an old man in a blue blouse was working among the cabbage ; our little grove looked cool and shady. How long had I been at the pavilion ? Only two days—the time seemed endless ! Two days ago Mr. Fleming had been a stranger, and now I did not try to disguise from myself the strong interest I felt in him. He had come into my life with this strange suddenness, and I felt that I could never banish him again.

'Olga will not always be with me,' I thought, as I looked out dreamily at the gray head bobbing among the cabbages. 'It is only for her sake that I am careful. Why should I not continue his friend, even if we find Basil ? there will be room for him. I must find out why he is so lonely and unhappy, and then, surely, there will be some way of helping him. Even Virginia will be interested ; she is so sorry for people who are unhappy ; and we are rich ;' and a sort of gladness came over me as I remembered our beautiful home—a sudden sense of power and well-being—almost for the first time. And he had the same name ; and it was the sort of work Robert would have loved, to make this poor young man believe in human nature again.

Mr. Fleming returned just as Jeanne came over from La Maisonnette with our luncheon. She told me Olga was still asleep, so I charged her on no account to disturb her. The rest of the day passed very quietly. Mr. Fleming spent the afternoon watching his boy ; but he was careful not to disturb me. If I wanted him, he was always at my side in a moment ; and he seemed very grateful if I let him do anything for Reggie.

'I am not in the way, am I ?' he asked once. 'I wish there were something I could do for you, but I am such a clumsy fellow.

Still, if you will only let me stop, I do so love to watch him. Look here, Miss Sefton, I think he wants to keep me ;' and he showed me how Reggie's feeble fingers were clinging round his hand.

'Of course you may stay,' I returned, smiling at them both ; it was such a pretty picture, only, somehow, I could only see it dimly through a mist. 'Do you think that I can have the heart to send you away again so soon ?'

He looked a little grave at the remembrance of the previous night, but he only said :

'I am afraid I was very selfish. You were quite right—Mr. Dodd said so ; and if I had fallen asleep I should never have forgiven myself.'

'Well, I am going to reward your obedience,' I returned lightly ; and, as he laid the little hand down and followed me to the window, I continued : 'You may stay here to-night if you like. At least, I can promise you a better couch than the floor.'

His face lighted up in a moment ; a quick flush of pleasure crossed it.

'Do you really mean it ? Will you indeed permit me to stay ? Shall I not be a hindrance to you ?'

'No ; I have been thinking it over. I have promised Mr. Dodd that I will take the nursing myself to-night, and as, thanks to you, I had some hours' sleep, I shall be able to manage it.'

'And, of course, Miss Leigh is tired ?'

'She would not own it ; but her watch was a long one, and she is not used to nursing. So, if you do not mind——'

'I—mind !' and a flash of the gray eyes answered me. 'I, who owe everything to your goodness, your generosity—my boy's life—my——'

'Hush, please !' laying my hand on his arm. I almost forgot he was not belonging to me ; we so soon grow to love those who are dependent on us for kindness, and he was only a boy to me—a boy like Basil. 'Well, that is arranged, and——'

'Wait one moment, please. There is Miss Leigh ; we must not forget her. She would like to say good-night to Reggie—she is so fond of him, and he of her. Do you think I do not see all that ?'

'Well ?'

'May I look if she be still in the garden ?—she was there just now—and then I will bring her across.'

There was a repressed eagerness in his manner ; but I hardly knew how to refuse. It was such a little thing to ask, and it would please Olga. So, after a moment's hesitation—which I

hoped he did not notice—I let him go. Five minutes after I saw them walking down the path, and went out on the steps to meet them.

‘Aunt Catherine,’ Olga said brightly, and I could see she was quite pleased and excited, ‘Mr. Fleming says there is such a beautiful sunset, and you must go with him and see it while I sit by Reggie. It will not take you long, and the air will do you good, and you have a long night before you.’

So this was what they had plotted—for I could see how busily they were talking—as they came up the garden; after all, it was only about me.

‘We have settled all that, Miss Sefton,’ observed Mr. Fleming, with his old coolness; ‘if you will just fling that lace thing over your head, we will go at once.’

‘And I will stop with Reggie. Do please go, Aunt Catherine;’ and Olga put her arms round me and gave me a gentle little push towards the steps, and Mr. Fleming held out his hand. ‘It will only take you a few minutes, and the boy is so much better.’

‘Yes, I think he is, Olga. Mr. Dodd seemed quite surprised at the progress he has made since the morning.’ And then I let myself be persuaded; my head felt heavy and tired, and the evening air was so delicious.

I was surprised to see Mr. Fleming unlock the door in the wall.

‘We shall see it much better from the common, and the air is fresher there,’ he explained; ‘and it is just as quiet as the garden.’ And then, as we walked down the field, he said hurriedly: ‘I think Miss Leigh will like to be alone with Reggie. She has taken such a wonderful fancy to him, has she not?’

‘Yes; but, then, Olga is so fond of children—most young girls are.’ And, just to tease him, I continued, half laughing: ‘Yesterday you seemed reluctant to accept her services. I recollect quite a little tirade on the subject.’

‘Oh, that is quite another matter,’ he returned, in an embarrassed tone. ‘I hope you did not think me ungracious; but if you knew how I felt when I came in and saw everything so fresh and beautiful, and Miss Leigh standing there in that apron——’

‘Well, of course it was not very becoming; not that Olga would think of that.’

‘That is not what I mean at all,’ he returned impatiently; ‘but I see you are only joking. It is not for me to notice what is becoming to a young lady, though——’ he paused, and then hurried on. ‘No, it was of something quite different that I was thinking. I had been bothering myself all the way home, thinking what a

muddle I had made of my life, and how everything brings its own punishment. I had just made up my mind I was not fit to be in the room with two such good women, and then I opened the door and saw Miss Leigh. I felt as though some princess had deigned to visit a beggar, and to put his hut in order. Somehow I felt quite crushed by it all, and that made me speak out as I did.'

'Yes, I see. But, Mr. Fleming, you do not understand Olga; she is one who loves to do a kindness for any one;' for I did not want him to think that she would not have done the same for the oldest and plainest man in her Majesty's dominions.

'Do you think I do not know that?' and there was a touch of haughtiness in his manner; he did not like to be misunderstood. 'I have never met with any one like Miss Leigh before; but I am glad to know that there are such people in the world. I am afraid I have not been a devout believer in human goodness, especially female human nature. It does me good to see such a noble exception.'

'Perhaps your wife—at least——' I stopped in some confusion. What was I going to say?

He turned round with rather a bewildered air.

'We were not speaking of my wife, but of Miss Leigh. Do not let us talk of Aline just now. Look at that sunset! is not that glorious—unutterably glorious? One cannot be quite hopeless when one looks at that!'

We had both stopped simultaneously. Sefton Point was just below us, and all around us the flashing waters of the bay. The western heavens were blazing with marvellous light, one colour merging into another: now crimson, now rose edged with pearl, now a sheet of vivid gold, with a molten, glittering sea under it. It seemed to me as I stood there as though a door were opened in heaven—as though that flood of glory must herald the white-robed messengers of mercy, the guardian angels of the night, if only our eyes were not too gross to see them. How dim this world must look to them as they glide through those mysterious portals—this little world, where man plays his sorry part!

I looked at Mr. Fleming as these thoughts passed through my mind. He was standing with folded arms, intently watching the spectacle.

'How beautiful, how unearthly it all looks!' he murmured. 'I have never seen anything quite so fine before. Miss Sefton, in the face of all that,' pointing to the sea and sky, 'I could not talk of my wife. Some day, when Reggie is better—quite well, I mean—I will tell you my miserable story, and you will say to me,

"Good-bye, Mr. Fleming; for I do not wish for your acquaintance any more."

'I am sure I shall say no such thing.'

'Will you not? but you have not heard my story yet. Oh, I grant you there are extenuating circumstances!—young hot blood, the wilfulness of boyhood; but there are some things that harden a man, that drag him down; and, after all, I have been much to blame.'

'Perhaps so.'

He turned round and looked at me with a smile.

'Do you think that forgiveness is possible? but you do not know—ingratitude is not a light sin.'

'No sin is light, Mr. Fleming; but I am one who believes in repentance. A man may go wrong; but it is never too late to retrace his steps. While there is life there is hope; we may say that of every human creature.'

'How curious!' he observed, in a musing tone; 'but you remind me so much of a friend of mine. Sometimes when you are speaking, I seem to hear his voice; he thought, like you, that there are infinite possibilities in every human being; he was always talking about such things;' he stopped, and, by his frown, I could see he was trying to throw off some painful recollection.

'Mr. Fleming, I am afraid we must go back.'

'Oh, I had forgotten Reggie for the moment! Fancy my forgetting that boy even for an instant! Do you know, I could not sleep without him last night—not properly, I mean—I have got so used to feeling him near me; I like to know I have got him all safe. Isn't it strange to care for a child like that? I could not have believed it once.'

'I suppose he is your only child, Mr. Fleming?'

I thought he seemed a little surprised at the question.

'Yes, there was a girl; but she only lived three months; she died in convulsions.' He turned his face away. 'I was sorry at the time; but I think I am glad now, and I only want Reggie.'

We had reached the pavilion by this time, and found Olga sitting beside the boy. She rose directly she saw us, and wished us both good-night.

It was growing dusk, and after a short interval Mr. Fleming lighted the lamp and sat down to read; but his attention often strayed from his book. Reggie was a little restless at first, but after an hour or two he seemed more comfortable, and then Mr. Fleming said he would have a nap, and I saw nothing more of him until morning. He was young enough to sleep soundly, and there was no reason to disturb him. He told me afterwards that he had

never rested more comfortably. 'I felt even in my dreams that I was near him, and I knew you would wake me if he got restless again. Now you must let me take your place, for you look downright ill this morning.' I told him that I would go across to La Maissonnette presently, when Mr. Dodd had paid his early visit, and I kept my word. Olga was evidently expecting me.

'Oh, you poor thing, how tired you look!' was her first greeting.

'Never mind that, Olga dear. Mr. Dodd says that Reggie is quite out of danger now, so I am going to leave him to his father this morning, and have a nice rest. Tell Jeanne to attend to Mr. Fleming's luncheon. He is to put up the red signal if I am wanted. They will do very well for a few hours: Mr. Dodd says so—and I confess I am rather worn out.'

And then Olga pounced on me and carried me off to my room. How cool and comfortable it looked! My last impression as I fell asleep was the remembrance of Olga in her white gown closing the brown shutters, while a bee hummed lazily about her.

The next few days passed quietly. At first, Olga and I shared the night-nursing between us; but one morning I again proposed to Mr. Dodd that Reggie should be moved to La Maissonnette, and to my relief he made no objection.

'It would be so much easier,' I said; 'I could have him in my own room, and then there would be no need for any more sitting up. It is not necessary now, but I do not like leaving him.'

'I think the other way would be preferable, and you have had enough inconvenience. Miss Leigh was talking to me yesterday; she is afraid you will be knocked up. Suppose you talk to Mr. Fleming about it. You could easily have the boy well wrapped up and carried across. I daresay his father would look after him all right; but after such an attack he will be weak for a long time, and a woman's care is best in such cases.'

I had made my plans, and the next morning I spoke to Mr. Fleming; he owned that it was a good idea. Reggie would be safe with me, and I should be spared all fatigue.

'Oh yes, of course it would work excellently—only——'

'Only you do not feel you can bear to part with the boy?'

'Oh, it is not that,' he returned in a tone of great embarrassment; 'I should be quite happy knowing he was over there and well looked after. It is only—well, I must say it;' and then he blurted it out with difficulty: 'Miss Sefton, you have done enough for me—too much. Last night I could hardly sleep for thinking about it all—how I was ever to repay you. Oh, it is not so

much the money I mean—I could work for that; it is the kindness, the goodness, and all for a stranger! Am I not right in saying it is too much?’

‘I do not regard you as a stranger!’

‘Well, perhaps not; but all the same I have no right. Look at the nights you have sacrificed, the discomforts you have had, and you have been accustomed to such luxuries. Oh, I know; Miss Leigh has told me!’

‘Miss Leigh is a sad chatterbox, I am afraid. Well, then, if these are your only objections, Reggie can be brought across at once.’ He did not answer. ‘Mr. Fleming, I should so like to have him, and so would Olga.’

I am sure there were tears in his eyes, for he turned away and walked to the window, but still he did not speak.

After a minute I followed him.

‘It shall be just as you please. Pray do not distress yourself; but I thought by this time you would look on me as your friend. There is no question of that sort between friends—only that one loves to take trouble.’

He turned round at that.

‘As though you have not taken trouble enough; as though you had not grown pale with watching over my boy. I think the angels, if there are such beings, must be like you and Miss Leigh. There, I will not hold out any longer; it is only my pride—because I hate to receive everything and give nothing. Shall I bring him now?’ but I told him there was no hurry for an hour.

His little bed was all ready, and by and by he was carried across in his father’s arms. Olga had dressed the room with flowers. The shutters were open, and one could see a vista of green leaves interlaced with slanting sunbeams; some climbing roses peeped in at the open window. As Mr. Fleming laid him down, I saw a lovely little smile flit across the white sunken face; but Reggie was too weak to express his satisfaction in any other way, only he held his father’s hand tightly, as though he feared to lose him.

I closed the door and left them together. Olga and I sat together for a long time in our pretty salon, talking over the strange week we had passed. Olga seemed as though she could not make enough of me.

‘Aunt Catherine,’ she said softly, as she looked at me, ‘do you know how tired you look? You have lost your nice, pretty colour, and it is all with nursing Reggie. I do not wonder a bit that Mr. Fleming is so grateful.’

'I think the hot weather has tried me ; but I shall be able to rest now. Olga, you have no idea how thoughtful Mr. Fleming is ; I never saw any one so unselfish. He says that he will not be in our way at all, and that if I will let him spend an hour with Reggie in the morning, and another in the evening, he will be quite content—that he is perfectly happy to let me have him.'

'I suppose he means to resume his old Bohemian life at the pavilion ; it will be very dull for him.'

'We cannot help that,' I returned quickly. 'Olga, I have been wanting to ask you something for days—how long will Jem's holiday tutorship last ?'

'Only for another week, Aunt Catherine.'

'Well, do you know, my dear, I have been thinking that it would be a good plan if I were to ask Jem to join us here. I shall still have to leave you so much alone, and if I have to stay here much longer, they may be wanting you back at Fircroft, and then Jem will be useful as an escort.'

I saw her colour rise, but she answered with her usual gentleness :

'Oh yes, and Jem may be able to help you. You must do as you like about all that, Aunt Catherine. I am very happy here, and it will be hard to leave you and Reggie ; but if you think it best—well, of course it is for you to decide ;' and then, as we heard footsteps moving overhead, we said no more on the subject.

CHAPTER XXI

LA RUE D'EGLISE

'We are ourselves
Our heaven and our hell—the joy, the penalty,
The yearning, the fruition. Earth is hell
Or heaven.'

The Epic of Hades.

I HAD not made this suggestion about Jem without a great deal of thought; but it seemed to me the only way of solving my difficulties with regard to Olga. Reggie had wasted away to a little skeleton, and it would be weeks before he regained strength. During that time I should be responsible for him, and as most of the nursing would still devolve on me, Olga would be left a good deal alone. Once or twice the thought had crossed my mind that one of the sisters from the hospital might be induced to take charge of Reggie; but when it came to the point I felt reluctant to give him up. He was so little trouble now; and I had Olga to help me. As he grew better he would lie happily for hours playing with the flowers his father brought him, or cuddling a tiny white kitten that Olga had discovered about the place.

Mr. Fleming kept strictly to his two daily visits, and I generally took advantage of them—by indulging in a stroll with Olga to our favourite point. During the remainder of the day he walked or sketched, or sat reading in the kitchen-garden. He had meant to resume his old Bohemian life—dining at a restaurant, or preparing his own meals; but I had taken all these arrangements into my own hands. I could not bear to think of him shifting for himself; besides, I knew his purse was growing empty, and he could not leave Reggie and go back to work. I had secured a helper for Jeanne in the person of a stout, bright-eyed girl, who was just then looking for a situation. Her name was Marie, and, among her other duties, I gave her the care of the pavilion, as

Madame Perrot still wantonly neglected her lodger. During its master's brief absence she swept and dusted and kept it tidy. Marie, too, conveyed his meals across to him when Olga and I sat down to ours. I was afraid every day that he would remonstrate with me on the subject, and kept purposely out of his way; but for a little while he held his peace. But one evening he left off playing with Reggie rather earlier than usual, and followed me into the garden. I saw directly by his manner that he wanted to speak to me, and I determined to give him the opportunity.

'Have you said good-night to Reggie, Mr. Fleming?'

'Yes; Miss Leigh is with him. I took the liberty of asking her to go to him. Miss Sefton, there is something I must say to you: how long is this sort of thing to go on?'

'Do you mean about Reggie? Mr. Dodd thinks that I may bring him downstairs to-morrow; the change will be good for him—he is going on so nicely; but of course he is still very weak.'

'Oh, it is not about Reggie! that is not what I mean, at all; but how long am I to go on living on your bounty? Do you know,' and here a dark flush crossed his face—a flush of bitter humiliation, 'that I wrote last week to my wife for some money? she has means of getting it for me—for her brother is not poor; and her answer was—and of course he dictated it: "You have played at being the idle gentleman long enough; it is time you and the boy came back. George has no money to spare just now. I wonder you are not ashamed to ask him." I told her how ill Reggie had been; but she takes no notice. I daresay she has forgotten all about it.'

'Mr. Fleming, there was no need to write to England. I can lend you any money you want for present use.'

'Do you think I would ask you to lend me a franc?' he replied; and nothing could be prouder than his look. 'Do I not owe you enough already?'

'You owe me nothing.'

'Oh no!' with a little laugh; 'it is of course absolutely nothing at all that you do for me; it is not the life of an enchanted prince that I am leading at present—oh no! When I come in from my walk, I find my hermitage swept and garnished—not a speck of dust anywhere; fresh flowers; a new book—even the paper. Sometimes I catch a glance of the substantial-looking fairy who had worked in my service.'

'Oh, you mean Marie. Yes, she is a nice creature! and, then, she finds so little to do here.'

'Once I had to cater for myself; to go into cheap restaurants; to boil smoky water for my coffee; to fetch my own milk and eggs

from the farm ; now I sit in my garden with my hands folded and wait. I know that at an appointed hour Marie will appear with her tray. I shall dine and sup like a king ! my coffee is delicious and rich with cream ! Miss Sefton, I ask again how long is this going on—how long ?' and here he drew a long breath. 'Am I to receive and not be suffocated with all this kindness ?'

I would not answer him lightly—he was too much in earnest for that.

'Mr. Fleming, do you know I think the generosity is on your side, not mine ? You are so good to let me have Reggie ; we were growing dull at La Maissonnette, and a child is such a boon to two women, and you never complain now of being lonely without him.'

'I hope I am not quite so selfish as all that,' he replied gravely ; 'but, Miss Sefton, there is one thing more that I must ask. Reggie is so much better now, and yet Mr. Dodd comes to see him every day, and it will not do to run up a long bill.'

'Do not trouble yourself about that,' I replied ; 'that is my affair.'

'I do not understand,' he returned ; and I could tell at once by his manner that I had said the wrong thing, for he seemed to stiffen in a moment. 'I hope you do not mean that Mr. Dodd will not wait a little until I can settle his account ; there will be no difficulty about that matter if he will only give me time ; there are ways and means, and I am not afraid of work.'

'Mr. Fleming,' I said after a moment's hesitation, for I did not dare pursue that subject, 'you have never told me what your business is. I hope I am not impertinent in asking ; but I know you will give me credit for a good motive.'

'You have asked rather an awkward question,' he returned with a quick, nervous laugh. 'I belong to the unemployed at present. When I first went to Oxford, it was with the intention of studying for the Bar ; but, like a fool, I threw away all my prospects in life by marrying. Oh ! I must tell you about all that some day. You should hear it all now, only I have to go down to St. Croix for that medicine Mr. Dodd forgot to bring, and it is growing late ; but I can tell you as much as this : when I committed that cursed folly of marrying at one-and-twenty, I had to take the first thing that offered—a mastership at Highgate. The pay was poor enough ; but we managed to live within our means, until Aline—well, never mind about that. I had to throw it up in a hurry, and then we had to fall back upon her brother.'

'Do you mean that you lived with him ?'

'Yes ; Aline is there now. He—Mr. Barton—is not a gentleman ; he does not understand how a man of my education feels about things. His business—well, it is retail, and,' with a proud

curl of his lip, 'it was not likely I could mix myself up with that sort of concern. Of course, there are misunderstandings; we are not on the same plane, George and I; but, in his way, he is good to us. He is trying to get me a clerkship now, as other things have failed; so I am only doing a little literary work at present—writing articles for one or two papers: sometimes they give me a book to review. I am expecting to be paid for one or two things soon; that is why I asked Aline to advance me the money.'

'Then, in that case, Mr. Fleming, you can surely allow me to be your banker?' But he only shook his head.

'People who live like enchanted princes do not require a very long purse,' he returned, with a smile. 'I am my own banker at present; I only wish you to know the real state of affairs. Now I must go. When may I talk to you again?'

'Shall we go on the common to-morrow evening? perhaps there may be a sunset.'

'Very well, then; I will fetch you. I must wish you good-night now.'

He looked at me wistfully, and a great sadness seemed to come into his eyes, but he did not say any more. The next minute the little gate swung back on its hinges, and I saw him striding down the path towards the pavilion.

The next morning, as I was sitting with Reggie writing my letters, while he played with some paper figures his father had cut out to amuse him, Olga came quickly into the room.

'Aunt Catherine,' she said, and there was a little excitement in her manner, 'I want to speak to you a moment. Do you know Monsieur Lefevre has come back, and that his brother is dead?'

I almost started at the name. Reggie's illness, and my interest in Mr. Fleming, had made me almost forget why I had come to St. Croix; but with Olga's words came a sudden rush of recollection.

'How do you know? who has told you?' for to my knowledge Olga had not quitted La Maisonnette that morning.

'It was Marie. I was talking to her just now while I warmed Reggie's beef-tea—you know I like to air my French, Aunt Catherine—and Marie is a nice, sensible girl. We were talking about St. Sulpice, and she had been relating some wonderful legend about that image of the Madonna and Child in the Lady Chapel, and then she mentioned Père Lefevre's name. "He told me that when I confessed to him on Friday," were her words. Of course I questioned her very closely; and it is true: he came back last Wednesday, his brother is buried, and they had masses said for the repose of his soul at St. Sulpice. Marie said Père Lefevre looked very worn and sad.'

'Olga, I must go to him this afternoon!'

'I knew you would say that,' she replied. 'Oh yes, you must go, Aunt Catherine, and I will take care of Reggie.' And then she continued gently: 'It seems as though we have forgotten Basil lately; but it is not really so, only dear little Reggie has engrossed all our thoughts.'

That was true, but I would not allow that Basil had been forgotten. I could not eat my luncheon that day, and the moment it was over I set off for St. Croix, quite disregarding Olga's entreaties that I would walk slowly and not fatigue myself. What did fatigue or heat matter if only I could come at last face to face with Père Lefevre, and learn from him whether Basil were dead or living! I recall that walk now with a feeling of surprise. I was so sure that Monsieur Lefevre would help me. I had no fears, no misgivings; the time of suspense was over. In a day or two Virginia would know all—whether she were the mother of a living son or not.

I remember, as I climbed the steep cliff path, how beautiful the bay looked beneath me. The children were playing on the yellow sands, filling their little pails full of bright amber seaweed. I could hear them calling to each other. By and by I passed the hospital and the cemetery; a young widow was kneeling beside one of the graves. How long that walk seemed to me! but at last I reached La Rue d'Eglise, and stood again before the tall, narrow house. It seemed months since I last stood there talking to the solemn-faced young priest. The friendly housekeeper seemed pleased to see me.

'Ah! here is madame again,' she said with a smile, 'and le bon père is actually within. That is well, after the many times madame has been turned from the door. Ah, there is need for patience in this world!' Would madame enter at once? and she would tell her master.

I stood for a minute in the little dark passage. I could hear her talking volubly, and a man's voice answering. Then she returned, and ushered me into a small room with a window overlooking St. Sulpice. Père Lefevre was writing. He rose at once, with a profound bow.

'Madame has desired to see me,' he said in a smooth, polished voice, as he offered me a chair. 'I fear, from what Marthe tells me, that my long absence has been of great inconvenience to madame. Alas! affairs not of my ordering have detained me! Such things are in the hands of le bon Dieu.'

I looked at Père Lefevre as he delivered himself of this little speech. He had a meagre, spare figure, but his face was pleasing;

the dark, sunken eyes were keen and intelligent. He was evidently a gentleman. His manner was suave and gentle, and at once put me at my ease. Perhaps he saw how nervous I was, for he went on to speak of his brother's death, and gave me a little sketch of the end, which enabled me to recover myself.

'And now madame must tell me how I can serve her,' he said at last.

In reply, I gave him a brief summary of our history. I told him Virginia's sad story; the misery of her married life; her flight to England, and desertion of her child; her diseased and lifelong terror of her husband.

'If she could only be certain of his death, I think there would be some peace for her remaining years,' I observed in conclusion. 'And if she could only gain some clue that might aid her in her search for her son, it would give her fresh life.'

'And her husband's name is Paul Lyndhurst?' he asked as soon as I had paused. He had listened to my story with grave attention. Only once, when I first mentioned Paul's name, he had looked up with a surprised air, and his keen glance seemed to read me through and through. 'It is very strange,' he muttered; and then he had composed himself to listen.

'Yes, monsieur,' I returned, in answer to his question; 'and the report has reached us that you attended his death-bed.'

'Did your informant state where Monsieur Lyndhurst died?'

'He believed at a village near Geneva; but there is no one of that name interred there—the whole account is confused.'

Monsieur Lefevre shook his head.

'I was never in the neighbourhood of Geneva in my life. Madame's informant is altogether wrong. Paul Lyndhurst—le bon Dieu have mercy on his soul!—lies in the cemetery at St. Croix. Madame may see his grave there if she will.'

I clasped my hands; the blood seemed to rush to my heart.

'Mon père, is this really true? Oh, it is grievous to rejoice that any one is dead!—but if you only knew!'

'My daughter,' he said kindly, 'it is not always easy to grieve when death takes our enemy. Human nature is weak. We are not all saints. I know enough of this unfortunate man to understand what you feel.'

'But when—when did he die?'

He thought a moment.

'I should say it was nearly ten years ago.'

Ten years! Virginia had been free ten years, and we had not known it!

'Shall I tell madame what I know?' And, as I looked at

him imploringly, he went on: 'It was after vespers one evening, as I was leaving St. Sulpice, that an old peasant woman accosted me. I knew her by name; she was old Nanette Duclos, who lived with her half-witted son in the little tumble-down cottage in the narrow alley that leads out of the Rue Dominique. It has been pulled down long since. She had a strange story to tell me. An Englishman, an artist, was lying ill—she believed dying—in her house. He had been seized with a sort of fit at her door a week previously, and, with the Divine charity one sees among the poor, she had nursed and tended him ever since.

"Mon père, he is not one of us; he has known better days," she said. "He cannot eat our food, and all he asks for is brandy; and he is dying; and he does not believe in le bon Dieu, or in the blessed Mary. And he lies there cursing, and no one can make him be silent. And he has almost frightened my poor Pierre to death."

'I went with her at once, and I found Nanette had not exaggerated matters. When I stepped up to the miserable bed, and looked in the face of the man who lay there, I knew at once that he was dying.'

'Mon père, will you describe him to me?'

'My daughter, it is not easy after all these years, and I have seen many dying men since; but I can recall a little. It was a handsome face—the features finely cut, but wasted by disease, and with all the evil passions stamped on it. He looked fiercely at me as I entered. "What do we want with priests?" I heard him say; "I never believed in them."

'I had some difficulty in entering into conversation with him. His manner continued defiant, and his oaths and curses made one's flesh creep to hear him; but our Holy Church teaches us how to deal with such cases: I must win him through his miserable appetites. I gained his attention at last by promising to send him a better bed, and, if the doctor permitted it, some good wine.

'He ceased to glare at me; a more human expression came over his face. "Why, you are not such a bad sort, after all!" he said, with an air of extreme surprise. "I never thought a French priest could be such a sensible fellow. Come! I call that behaving like a gentleman. Now, I don't mind entering into a compact with you. Just see after a few comforts for me, and I will undertake to listen to as many sermons as you care to preach to me."

'I knew better than to argue with him. There was a fierce, unsettled light in his eyes, which resembled insanity. I thought

it prudent to return a soothing answer, and withdrew under the plea of bringing the doctor. When I returned it was with a physician ; but, as I surmised, there was little to be done.

"Yes, he is dying, poor fellow!" was his report as he joined me in the room below. "This is a case for you, not me. He cannot last many days."

"Is it your opinion," I asked, "that the man is deranged?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is not his fault that he is still sane; he has drunk pretty nearly all his senses away. As far as I can tell, he has lived on brandy, and nothing else. He is calling out for it now."

"You do not mean that I am to give it him?"

"Certainly—but in small doses—unless he is to collapse at once. I tell you, the poor wretch has made it his food for months; he will suffer tortures for the want of it; and, after all, nothing matters now; he is a dead man."

"In that case, I will give him a little," and I went up at once. He almost snatched the cup from my hand in his wolfish eagerness. "Oh, that is good—that is life!" he cried, as he drained it. "Give me some more, and I will call you a good fellow!" But he swore at me when I carried the bottle away.

'Madame, I need not trouble you with all the miserable recital. We poor priests know how hard it is to win these wandering souls. He was a great sinner; but God is good, and I would not lose hope. I surrounded him with comforts: he had a clean bed, fresh linen; one of our good sisters nursed him; we induced him to take a little soup; the doctor had given him an anodyne; he suffered less; his temper improved. Sometimes he would talk to me; by degrees I got him to tell me his story. My daughter, some things I regard as under the seal of confession. A life such as his could not be edifying.'

'I understand, Père Lefevre, far too well. Heaven forbid that the evil record of Paul Lyndhurst's life should pollute a woman's ear!'

The good father went on:

'By degrees he softened perceptibly. My attentions pleased him; he was grateful for the alleviations and comforts I was able to procure for him. In spite of his recklessness, a terror of the black future that yawned before his sinful soul at times haunted him; then he would speak to me of the past.'

'Did he mention his wife?'

'A little. He told me one day he had married a young English heiress for her money; and that, to his disgust, her father had disinherited her. "She was a handsome girl," he

observed ; "but I was never in love with her. I cared far more for the little Pauline I deserted. She was always whining about her own people. I grew weary of her at last. It was a mistake for a man of my calibre to tie himself down to matrimony ; she lost her good looks, too, when the boy came. Ah, well ! I was drunk one night, and I believe we had a bit of a quarrel. Anyhow, she left me with the brat on my hands, and that is all I know about it."

'But, mon père, why did he not seek her for his own interest ? To be sure, my father was alive for many years after that, and would have protected her against him ; but, still, it seems strange that he should have made no attempt to possess himself of her fortune.'

'I believe he was hopeless on the subject, and, as you say, madame, your father lived for many years after your sister returned to him. As far as I can make out from a very disjointed narrative, the unfortunate man rejoiced in his freedom ; the child was an incubus, but he bore with him for a time, intending by and by to rid himself of him by sending him back to his mother. Meanwhile, things went on from bad to worse ; his habits grew more depraved ; he had an attack of delirium tremens, and was removed to a hospital. On his recovery he suddenly remembered his boy ; from the first he had taken very little notice of him, and but for the care of the faithful *bonne* the little creature would have fared badly. He was told now that during his illness they had been befriended by an English clergyman who was travelling for his health ; that this unknown benefactor had literally fed and clothed the child, and that a strong affection had grown up between them ; and that this good friend desired nothing less than to take the boy back with him to England, and to bring him up as his adopted son.

'I will give you Paul Lyndhurst's own words :

"I was glad to be rid of him ; and a feeling of revenge against the woman who deserted me made me determined not to send him back to the Hall. If Virginia wanted him, she must make terms with me, Paul Lyndhurst. I wanted to go into Italy, and a child and nurse were not to my taste. I had an interview with his reverence, and in the end I said, 'Leave me your address, and when I want Basil I will send for him ; until then you are welcome to him' ; for, you see, I did not mean to part with the boy out and out. One day he would be rich—I did not forget that."

'And now I am coming to the strangest part of all. By his own account, Paul Lyndhurst lived a wild, reckless life in Rome

and Naples, but one day he heard of the death of his father-in-law ; it had happened long before, but in his wanderings the news had failed to reach him.

‘If his father-in-law were dead, Basil—his son Basil—must be his grandfather’s heir. He must claim him at once ; there was no time to be lost. Madame, this wretched man was actually on his way to England to seek his son when his fate overtook him, and he was taken ill at Nanette’s door.’

‘Mon père, tell me quickly the name of the clergyman.’

But Père Lefevre shook his head.

‘My daughter, how am I to tell you ? No names were mentioned at all between us. With the cunning that seemed to belong to him, Paul Lyndhurst never once pronounced the name of his father-in-law, the Hall, or the English priest. “To-morrow you shall write to his reverence,” he said. “No, I have no address about me ; but I never forget anything. Yes ; to-morrow you shall write.” Alas ! madame, when the morrow came the nurse who was sitting by him heard a slight sound, but before she could reach him he was dead !’

‘Dead ! Oh no, mon père—not without telling you where Basil was ?’

‘Alas ! yes, my daughter. We buried him here. Paul Lyndhurst—that was all we could put. We could find no trace of writing—nothing that could prove his wild story. Sometimes I have imagined it was the creation of his fancy—the outcome of delirium ; there were times when he did not seem sane ; how did I know whether this Basil had an existence ? Just to satisfy my conscience, I inserted in an English paper the death of Paul Lyndhurst, and added my name ; nothing came of it, and voilà tout, madame.’

He looked at me compassionately, as though he feared I should be overwhelmed with disappointment ; but I started from my seat.

‘Mon père, it was an English clergyman who adopted Basil ?’

‘Yes, certainly ; so it was affirmed.’

‘Then in that case it will be easy to discover Basil. We can advertise ; there can be no difficulty in that ; our lawyer shall put the matter in hand at once—it shall be in every paper ; Basil’s adopted father will soon be found. Oh, I have hope now !’

‘It would be better still if madame could find the bonne. Oh, if we only knew her name !’

‘Ah, as to that, mon père—Lizette must be an old woman now. Perhaps she is not living.’

'What name did you say, my daughter?' he asked quietly.

'Lizette Dupont.'

'There was a woman of that name living with her granddaughter in the Rue Anglaise. Tenez, madame, permit me to ascertain whether she be still living. If you will give me your address, I will write to you.'

I gave him the address, and with many thanks took leave of him. The good old man accompanied me to the door, and gave me his blessing. It was too late to do anything more; to-morrow I must visit the cemetery and read the name, Paul Lyndhurst, for myself; but now I must return to La Maisonnette. Olga would be growing uneasy at my delay. A fiacre passed me; I hailed the driver and jumped in, and throwing myself back on the shabby cushions, I closed my eyes wearily, and gave myself up to reflection on the miserable story I had just heard.

CHAPTER XXII

'THE EPIC OF HADES'

'To cure thee of thy pride, that deepest-seated ill,
God humbled His own self—wilt thou thy pride keep still?

God humble, and man proud! Do angels, when they range
This earth, see any sight at once so sad and strange?

He knew, who healed our wounds, we quickly should be fain
Our old hurts to forget—so let the scars remain.'

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

As we drove down the lane I saw Olga standing at the gate. Her white gown and great red umbrella had quite a picturesque effect. She had a bunch of yellow roses in her hand; behind her were the brown gate and the sycamore tree. The shutters had all been thrown back to admit the fresh evening breeze. Windows and doors were open, curtains fluttering. As I walked up the courtyard I had glimpses of the shady garden. Jeanne was coming from the well with a green and yellow cruche. Her apron was filled with corn for the fowls. I could hear them clucking in expectation.

Olga drew me into the drawing-room. The little tea-table stood in one window, the big easy-chair beside it; there was a perfume of roses, and heliotrope, and mignonette. Olga put her arms softly round me.

'How tired you look, Aunt Catherine! and, yes, you have been crying; your eyes are quite wet. What is the matter, dear? Is it another disappointment? and you have been so long away—all the afternoon!'

I put up my hand to my face in some surprise. Were my eyes really wet? I knew nothing about it.

'Oh, it is all so sad,' I replied with a sigh; 'and Père Lefevre could tell me so little about Basil: only that when he was quite a

baby—at least, not more than two years old—a clergyman took him to England and brought him up as his own son.'

I saw Olga start; she was pouring me out some tea, and her hand trembled so that she spilt some.

'Oh, how awkward I am!' she said with a little laugh; but her face was quite pale; 'but of course you know the clergyman's name? Père Lefevre will have told you.'

'That is just what he does not know himself,' I returned in a vexed tone—'neither his name nor the place where he lives. We shall have to advertise in the *Times* and the *Guardian*, and, indeed, in all the papers, until we find Basil's adopted father; but there is one thing I know, Olga, that, if you will, we may stand together to-morrow at the grave of Paul Lyndhurst.'

'Is he buried here?' she asked in an awe-struck voice. 'Oh, then, you have learned something this afternoon? Oh yes, we will go, and then you can really tell poor Mrs. Lyndhurst that you have seen his name, and that she need not fear him again. I think that she has never quite got rid of the terror that one day she might see him.'

'I know it was her mania; no one could persuade her out of it; that was why she would never leave the Hall for a single day. Poor dear Virginia! Dr. Langham said at last that it was hysteria; her nerves were too much worn; she could not be reasonable; but, Olga, think of the pity of it: he has been dead ten years, and Virginia did not know!'

'Ten years! do you think you can tell me all about it, Aunt Catherine, or are you too tired? Mr. Fleming is with Reggie, and he says that I am to let him know if you wish to go out with him this evening. It is not yet six; but if you are too tired——' and she looked into my face very gravely.

'Oh, it is impossible! I could not listen to him to-night,' I said wearily; 'I should be thinking of that miserable story I have just heard, and how we are to find Basil. Mr. Fleming will not mind if I put him off until to-morrow.'

'He will not mind at all,' she returned quietly; 'it must be as you like, Aunt Catherine.'

'Then I would rather talk to you instead,' was my reply, and as she placed herself beside me, I related all that Père Lefevre had told me. Olga was always a good listener. It was not her way to interrupt people; but now she sat so motionless, with her face half hidden by her hand, that once or twice I stopped in my narrative.

'Go on; please tell me all,' she would say when I paused, and I would take up the thread again.

'It is horrible—horrible!' she exclaimed when I had finished; 'how can there be such God-forsaken souls anywhere when'—dropping her voice reverently—'when Christ has died. How very difficult life is, Aunt Catherine! One cannot understand.'

'It is a mystery,' I returned; 'there is so much that is unknowable. Some of us have to stumble on in darkness all our lives; the light is hidden from our eyes. How do we know? Just at the last God may have spoken to him; he may have heard and answered. It is never for us to judge between the most sinful soul and its Creator.'

'You are right, Aunt Catherine. I like your merciful creed: people are too prone to judge, to pronounce condemnation. Do not talk about it any more; I can see how it has tried you. There is something I want to show you that I think will interest you. Mr. Fleming lent me a book to-day, because he said I should be dull without you, and he brought it across this afternoon. It is the *Epic of Hades*. I remember you liked it so much; but I have not read a page yet.'

'It is a very good book,' I replied as I took it carelessly. Evidently Olga wanted to distract my thoughts; but I was not in the humour to discuss the *Epic of Hades*. I opened it at random, just noting the pencil-marks on the margin of the pages; favourite passages had been underlined. It had been well read. At last I turned to the title-page, and then an involuntary exclamation escaped me. Olga was watching me; she drew a long breath of relief.

'You recognise it, then, Aunt Catherine?'

Recognise it! how many years had passed since I had seen that handwriting? Six-and-twenty years—nay, more—and I had been a girl then; but I knew it at once. It was not a handwriting that could be easily forgotten. It was characteristic of its owner—large, benevolent, and yet a trifle angular, betraying a marked individuality and originality.

'Basil Fleming, from his affectionate friend, Robert Lucas Fleming, St. Mark's, Leeds.' This was all.

Olga left me and went outside for a few minutes. She wanted me to recover myself; but I could only sit there looking at that one name—Robert. I was impatient at myself at last at this emotion after half a lifetime of silence. Oh, what fools we women are! The hair grows gray while the heart is young; there are wrinkles on the face, and the pulses still beat as quickly. Why are we so slow to learn our lesson—that youth has fled and taken all our precious things with it; that between us and them there is a gulf fixed? It was not the Robert Fleming I once knew

who had written those few words. This was an older Robert—a man who had grown gray in his Master’s service. Only his handwriting was the same.

‘Good-bye, Catherine—my Catherine,’ had been his last words to me; ‘it is not God’s will that we should be happy together; not yet—not in this world. Let us try to submit ourselves;’ and then he had left me. Had he lived single for my sake, as I for his, or had any other woman become dear to him? He had not married, that was all I knew.

‘Aunt Catherine,’ and Olga touched me gently, ‘do you feel better now? Oh, I know I have given you a shock; and his name is Basil.’

I was so bewildered that I could not take in her meaning. I read the inscription again: ‘Basil Fleming, from his affectionate friend, Robert Lucas Fleming.’ To be sure, what could it mean?

‘Is it—can it be Basil—your Basil, Aunt Catherine?’ she whispered in my ear.

I put my hands on her shoulders, and almost pushed her away in my excitement. I did not seem as though I could understand, and yet——

‘Do you not see,’ she continued gently, ‘how strangely it all seems to fit in? A clergyman in England has adopted him; he may even have given him his name. It is your Mr. Fleming, and perhaps Basil——’

But I would not let her go on.

‘How do we know? Olga, it is not possible! Why do you excite me in this way? Are there no other Basils in England? No, you must not delude me with such hopes!’

‘But if it be true, Aunt Catherine?’

‘How do I know that it is true? How do I know anything until he tells me? Oh, I was wrong to say I would not go out with him! I cannot sleep until he answers this question: What have he and Robert Fleming to do with each other?’

‘Dear Aunt Catherine, you shall ask him that question; but you must not agitate yourself like this. You will frighten Mr. Fleming, and he will not know how to talk to you.’

‘But, Olga, if what you suspect is true, and he is really Basil——’

And then I could say no more, but could only cling to Olga and weep; for it seemed to me as though it could not be true that Providence had this rich gift in store for us; that it must be a dream, a hallucination; that, after all, we were deceiving ourselves. Robert Fleming might only be a friend—a chance acquaintance. Were there not other Basils in England? I was

so shaken, so bewildered with it all, that I could only cry softly to myself.

Olga behaved beautifully ; she made me lean against her, and only said a quiet, soothing word at intervals. It might not be true ; I must not distress myself ; but it would be nice to hear about an old friend, and perhaps Mr. Fleming could tell me about him ; 'and even—even if he be the wrong Basil, perhaps your Mr. Fleming will help you to find him,' she finished.

Just at this moment we heard footsteps descending the little wooden staircase. I sat up at once and tried to compose myself, and Olga looked at me in a questioning manner.

'Shall I call him ?' she whispered ; but as I hesitated the footsteps came nearer ; there was a quick, light tap at the door, and Mr. Fleming came into the room.

'Reggie is asleep,' he began, 'and I wanted to know——' and then he stopped and looked at us both. 'I am intruding ; you are not well, Miss Sefton. I beg your pardon.'

'Aunt Catherine is very tired,' whispered Olga.

She wished to shield me, but I put her aside almost impatiently.

'What does it matter if I am tired ? Mr. Fleming, I should like to walk with you to the Point ; the air will do me good.'

'Are you sure that you are quite fit for it ?' he returned, with such an air of concern that the tears rushed to my eyes again. 'Something has been troubling you. Miss Leigh looks anxious,' with a quick glance at her.

Olga's colour rose a little, but she was quite equal to the situation.

'You are right ; Aunt Catherine has been agitated. She has much to trouble her. If she would only keep quiet until to-morrow ! but it is for her to decide.'

'I should like to go,' I replied quickly ; but my limbs trembled as I rose from my seat.

I saw Olga and Mr. Fleming exchange looks, but neither of them said a word. Olga brought me my bonnet, and wrapped a little shawl round me, and Mr. Fleming quietly gave me his arm.

'Perhaps the air will be the best tonic, after all,' he said, as we turned into the field-path ; but I made no answer.

The book was still in my hand ; I was thinking how I could ask him that question. Mr. Fleming became silent in his turn. We passed the firs, and strolled quietly down the little path that led to the Point. As soon as we had reached it, he spread the rug Olga had given him, and then placed himself at my feet. The

shore beneath us was strangely still this evening; the tide was low, and the stretch of yellow sands, with the gray boulders and masses of bright-coloured seaweed, seemed bare and empty; one could hear the soft lapping of the water. A bell was tinkling from the hospital on the cliff; a little boat with a red sail was coming across the bay; the opposite shore seemed bathed in a strange silvery light. Mr. Fleming drew his gray cap over his eyes; a long sigh escaped him.

'And I have to talk about myself?' he said in a voice of suppressed bitterness.

'Yes,' I replied; 'but not just now. I want you to tell me something else first;' and I pushed the book towards him as I spoke. 'I want you to tell me how you came to know Robert Fleming?'

My question seemed to surprise him; he looked at the inscription, and then at me.

'Do you know him?' he asked in a tone of excessive astonishment. 'He has never spoken of you to me—never; and I knew all his friends.'

'Perhaps not. I have not seen him since I was a girl; it is not likely that he would mention me. But this is not the question. What I want to know is your relationship to Robert Fleming.'

'Then I will tell you in a few words. In one sense there is no relationship between us; in another, I owe him everything. When I was a child—a poor neglected little creature with no one to care for me but an ignorant peasant woman, who was my *bonne*—he adopted me, educated me, and brought me up as his own son. My dear lady, what ails you? you are ill! please let me fetch Miss Leigh——'

'No, no!' I gasped; 'it is nothing; let me be quiet a moment; it will pass;' but as I hid my face in my hand, a sob escaped me. 'O my God! it is Basil,' I said to myself, and a sort of giddiness came over me. I had a dim consciousness that my hands were drawn away very gently, and that my dear boy was chafing them in his own.

'They are icy cold,' I heard him murmur; 'what can be the matter?'

After a time I recovered myself. Yes, I could listen now; the faintness had passed.

'I am better,' I said, trying to smile. 'I am so sorry I frightened you. I suppose Olga was right, and I have tired myself.'

'But you will let me take you home now?' he said in a caressing voice.

'Not for worlds,' I replied firmly; 'it was only giddiness; it has quite left me. I am perfectly comfortable here with this nice stone to rest against, and it is so quiet. I am longing to hear your story. When Mr. Fleming adopted you, did he give you his name at the same time?'

'I will tell you all I know; but that is very little. Mr. Fleming was travelling abroad when he found me. He noticed me first, and then the people of the house told him about me. My father was in a hospital. I had no one belonging to me but my *bonne*; the poor creature was in great trouble and perplexity. She had no money, and but for the kindness of strangers we should have starved. "I permit them to occupy the garret," the mistress of the house told him; "but I tell Lizette that she must apply to the *Maire*. I have children of my own to clothe and feed." I was too young to remember this time; but Mr. Fleming has often recalled the day when he came up to our garret, and how I ran across the floor to him and clasped him round the knees, and called him daddy.'

"My heart went out to you then, Basil," he has said to me since, "when I lifted you up and you laid your dark curly head against me, and I felt your childish arms round my neck. We were fast friends from that hour, and never a day passed without a visit to the garret."

'I was a mere baby; but I certainly remember a tall man who took out his watch to show me, and who brought me playthings and bonbons, and how I climbed on his knee, and called him daddy.

'One day he took me in his arms. "I am your father now, Basil," he said to me; "you are given to me." Later on, when I could understand, he explained to me that my own father had gone away, and had given me into my friend's keeping.

"You are to live with me, and be my little boy until he comes to fetch you," that was all he ever told me of my father; and once, when I asked why my name was Fleming, he told me my father had not wished me to bear his name; but he never hinted at any reason.'

'And Mr. Fleming brought you to England?'

'Yes, and I remember I was sea-sick, and cried for my *bonne*; everything else was indistinct. One of my earliest recollections was playing with a Dandy Dinmont called Pepper on the hearth-rug, and of a nice motherly young woman whom I called Martha, and who washed and dressed me with her own children. And I remember that I always slept in a little bed in Mr. Fleming's room, and that I cried if the watch were not under my pillow—but I shall weary you!'

'No, no ! if you only knew how every little detail interests me !'

'You are very good to listen to me at all,' he replied in a low tone ; 'but I need not linger over those early days. Mr. Fleming had brought me to his own lodgings. He lived in a road leading to St. Mark's. It was a high narrow house, and had a long strip of garden at the back, where we youngsters played. Mr. Fleming lives there still.'

'And he is still the curate of St. Mark's.'

'Yes,' with a quick glance at me, as though my trembling voice arrested his attention, 'he is the senior curate ; there are two others ; it is a large parish, and a very poor one. Once or twice a country living has been offered him ; but he has always refused it. He says he will live and die at St. Mark's among his poor people. I have heard it said that when Mr. Carbert dies—he is the vicar, and an old man now—the bishop will offer the living to Mr. Fleming.'

'Will he accept it ?'

'Most certainly he will ; the position will just suit him ; there is not a man, woman, or child whom he does not know, and they are all devoted to him. "Our Mr. Fleming," that is what they call him.'

'And all these years he has been 'poor' ?'

'Not so very poor,' he answered quickly ; 'he had a little money left to him before he adopted me, and this enabled him to send me to a good school, and afterwards to Oxford. He grudged me nothing, and yet he spent absolutely nothing on himself.'

'And he is living still in the old house at Gresham Street ?'

'Yes, do you know it ?' in some surprise. 'No. 27 ; and Martha still takes care of him. Her husband is dead, and all her children except Patience are married and out in the world.'

'And you have lived with him there all these years, Basil ?'

The name escaped me involuntarily. I saw him look at me, and a smile came to his lips.

'How strange to hear you call me that ! but I like it—I like it.'

'I beg your pardon,' I returned in some confusion.

'Do I not tell you I like it ?' was the reproachful answer. 'I wish you would always call me Basil. Yes, I lived with him off and on until I married. We were very comfortable ; we had a big room running from front to back. Mr. Fleming kept all his books in the back part, and we called it the study. We had a round table and some big arm-chairs in the front part, and that was our dining-room. I never seemed to interrupt him ; he would write

his sermons while I smoked or played with Scamp, who was Pepper's successor. When he came in tired from his labours in the parish he always seemed to like to see me there. "There you are, Basil," I can hear him say now; "just help me off with my coat, there's a good lad, and let us be comfortable." Oh, those were happy days! he finished with a groan.

'And he sent you to Oxford?'

'Yes; I was giving him trouble, and he hardly knew what to do with me. Public-school life had turned me out a restless, conceited sort of fellow, with a strong belief in my own brilliant abilities, and a lofty disdain for what I called narrow opinions. My success at school had spoilt me. I had grown up self-willed, with a dangerous love of pleasure, and a decided tendency to choose my friends for amusement rather than edification; any opposition, any attempt to guide and restrain these weak and evil inclinations, only irritated me; even the mild advice and loving admonitions of my dearest friend only excited my impatience. I remember how often I ended an argument with the remark, "We of the younger generation think otherwise, Mr. Fleming. Thank goodness! we live in a more enlightened age," and I remember how his grieved silence was his only answer.

'I had gained a scholarship, and as my great wish was to go to Oxford and afterwards to study for the Bar, it was decided that I should go to Exeter. The evening before I left Leeds he spoke to me with unusual seriousness; he mentioned my faults one by one, and implored me to struggle against them; he warned me of the temptations of University life. "Your pride and love of popularity will lead you into danger, Basil," he said. "With your pleasure-loving temperament, and, pardon me if I speak plainly, your self-indulgence and dislike of denying yourself any present gratification, you will certainly fall into serious difficulties unless your corrective be hard work and the friendship of men worth knowing. My boy, for eighteen years you have been my one thought; do not disappoint me!"

'I was in a softened mood that evening, and I listened to him with unwonted patience. I remember telling myself as I went up to my little room that he would have reason to be proud of me—that I would distinguish myself at Oxford. I fell asleep and dreamed I was on the Woolsack. I was full of spirits the next morning, and quoted the dream as a favourable augury of the future. Mr. Fleming only shook his head.

"My boy," he said sadly, "I do not believe in auguries; I would rather have you a good man than see you Chancellor of England."

'He was right,' I murmured.

'Yes, he was right, I know it now; but I was a self-willed young fool then; I would not learn my lesson until bitter experience taught it to me. At that time I preferred the devil's teaching. Miss Sefton, it was an evil day that I went to Oxford; but I mean to pass over my year at Exeter very quickly. I do not wish to shock your ears, and the retrospect of this part of my life is very painful to me.'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF A SUMMER IDYLL

‘I require no argument to urge me to be kind to a pretty woman.’
Fair Maid of Perth.

‘A wilful man must have his way.’—*The Antiquary.*

ALL this time the strain on my mind and attention had been terrible. I had followed every word with famished eagerness. How often in the old days had I wearied Heaven with prayers that the silence between us might be broken, and that I might at least have the consolation of hearing something of the life Robert Fleming was leading. But it is one of the sad mysteries that seem to wall in human souls in tangible darkness that such prayers are often left unanswered. And yet if we would only wait long enough, if the precious ointment of our faith were not all poured out upon our idols, if we could believe that the blackness of our cloud would be relieved by a silvery lining, if we would possess our souls in patience instead of lashing them into wild rebellion, it might still be well with us!

Oh, it was easy for the middle-aged Catherine to preach philosophy! But for the young, girlish Catherine, stretching out her hands with pitiful yearning for the birthright of happiness—the rightful heritage of her youth—it was not quite so easy. One cannot see through blinding tears. A bruised heart cannot moralise.

If only Basil would have told me more! Oh yes, I called him Basil to myself with a strange thrill and lingering over the word! I hardly dared look at him for fear he read the truth in my eyes.

‘You are my boy and hers!’ That is what I longed to say to him. But I must hear his story first. If only he would have told me more of that life in Gresham Street! But, with a man’s

impatience of details, he was hurrying on to a more marked episode of his existence. I noticed that as he began to speak again he turned his face aside; but I could see his features working. A sombre and gloomy light had come into his eyes.

'I commenced my University life with Mr. Fleming's warning ringing in my ears. Before many months had passed it was more than verified. I was considered the most popular man in college. I had a host of acquaintances, but few friends. Sober-minded reading men avoided my company; but all the wild, versatile youths gathered round me, and helped me to waste time and substance. Not in the riotous living of the prodigal—thank Heaven I never fell so low as that!—but in unprofitable discussions, in festive gatherings that unfitted me for my work.

'Many of my friends were unsettled in their views; to them there was nothing sacred in heaven and earth. I did not openly avow myself an Agnostic, or a follower of the black philosophy, but the simple truths I had been taught by a good man seemed to shrink into nothingness. "What do we want with creeds?" they would say. "The people are not to be led in leading-strings any longer; natural religion is all that we want." Oh, it makes me sick to remember the cant phrases of our soulless philosophy—utter negation, absolute impossibility of knowledge, of the finite mind measuring the infinite! This is what we taught, fools that we were—sifting our puny knowledge, as the child digs his little pit in the sand to hold the ocean!

'When I went home for my first vacation, Mr. Fleming received me with an air of restraint. He looked worn and anxious, and, though his affection for me was evidently the same as ever, the old unrestrained intercourse seemed impossible. Often I saw him look at me sadly, as though he were waiting for my confidence, but no word of reproach passed his lips. Alas! for the first time, I was eager to leave him. The quiet atmosphere seemed to stifle me. I longed for my lawless freedom and brilliant debates—the society of my so-called friends.

'I had one friend in particular, Stewart Morton. He was a man of some consideration; his family was old and wealthy, but his father and brother were well known for their freethinking opinions. Stewart had already made his mark at Oxford. He had undeniable abilities, he was clever and witty, and his brilliant conversation and attractive person blinded people to his faults; but, as a man, he was wholly without principle. I was in the habit of taking long walks with him, partly for exercise, and partly to carry on those discussions in which we both delighted. His dangerous sophistries were rapidly undermining my moral nature.

‘After a time his stronger intellect dominated me. But for Stewart Morton I should never have met my fate. One afternoon, or really early evening, we found ourselves in a village some miles away from our college. We were tired and hungry and thirsty, and even Stewart’s brisk tongue had flagged a little. We were sauntering down a field where some haymakers were at work. One of these, a girl, attracted our attention. She was moving slowly between the cocks, raking up the loose hay. She wore a blue cambric dress and a white sun-bonnet. There was something regal in her gait; she looked like a princess who was playing at being a rustic. As we passed her, she leant on her rake and looked at us.

“By the powers, what a beautiful girl!” observed Stewart in my ear. “What a subject for an idyll! by Jove! yes, and I will speak to her;” and, prompted by mischief, Stewart put his words into practice.

‘Taking off his hat with his finest air, he informed the girl that we had lost our way, and were weary and starving. Was there a farmhouse near where we could obtain refreshment? And then he added, with glib falsehood, that his friend, pointing to me, was just recovering from an illness, and that he feared the effect of the long walk before us in our present fasting condition. I saw the girl look at me. She had large soft eyes, like a gazelle, with a sort of appealing sadness in them.

“There is Mr. White’s house,” she returned—“the red-brick house you see yonder; they are very kind, hospitable people. I am staying with them. I do not think they would refuse a glass of milk to a stranger; shall I go and ask them?” with another shy glance at me.

“May we go with you?” suggested the young hypocrite; “you can walk as far as the house, Fleming, can you not?”

“Oh yes!” I returned rather sulkily, for his little fiction displeased me. There was no need to have invented that story of my illness; but Stewart was in one of his mischievous moods.

“Your friend does not look delicate,” observed the girl in some surprise. She spoke in a low, deep voice; the accent was not perfectly refined. As she spoke she took off her sun-bonnet and fanned herself with it, as she walked between us. She was wonderfully handsome. The shape of her head was beautiful, and there was something classical in the smooth dark hair, drawn off the white forehead and coiled in glossy plaits behind. Her figure was large, but finely moulded, and there was an air of gravity about her that added to my interest in her.

"He is not naturally delicate," commenced Stewart provokingly; "but an illness always pulls down a fellow. You are pretty fit now, aren't you, Fleming—only in a starving condition?"

"What more he meant to add is buried in oblivion, for at that moment a stout comely woman, with pink ribbons in her cap, came out of the farmhouse.

"Whoever are you bringing along with you, Aline?" she asked in a puzzled tone, shading her eyes from the sun; but before the girl could answer, Stewart, hat in hand, was beside her. I heard the explanation again—long walk; two undergraduates; one of them recovering from an illness; impossible to get him back without refreshment; he would not answer for the consequences.

"Dear sakes! just hear him," she interposed in quite a flurry; "poor young gentleman! Isn't it lucky, Aline, I have just masked the tea? I am sure you are welcome, gentlemen, if you will honour us by sitting down with us. White!"—bustling into the passage,—“wherever is that man, I wonder? White, here's company; two of our Oxford gentlemen dead beat and fasting. Aline, get some more plates, and tell Jane to dish up that ham. You are kindly welcome, young gentlemen!"

"I do not know how Stewart felt, but I was tolerably ashamed of his wholesale fibs, as these kind, homely creatures dispensed their simple hospitality. Mr. White, whose florid face matched his wife's ruddiness, shook hands with us heartily.

"It is not the first time that young puss, Aline, has brought in gentlemen," he said with a wheezy laugh and a knowing wink at the girl.

"I thought she looked distressed; she coloured and went out of the room without speaking. On her return she sat down opposite me and began to cut bread-and-butter. I could not take my eyes off her. It was not so much her singular beauty that charmed me as her gravity, her silence, and the strange pathos of those dark eyes. Once or twice as she looked at me a sort of shiver passed over me, a thrill of expectation that went through me. Now and then she offered me something; but I noticed she never spoke or looked at Stewart. He was chattering in his clever, heedless way for the benefit of his host and hostess. Now and then the farmer leant back in his elbow-chair with a loud guffaw that made the tears run down his cheeks; but Aline never smiled. When tea was over, I was standing by the window a moment, when Aline suddenly paused beside me.

"Have you been ill?" she said, fixing her strange eyes on me.

"No," I returned in a vexed voice ; "it was only his nonsense. I have never been ill in my life."

"I thought so, you looked so strong ; then you do not tell stories like him ?"

I shook my head, and then added hastily :

"He meant no harm, it was only his fun ; he is really very nice when you know him."

"Humph ! I think I like you best," she replied, and an odd little smile played round her lips ; and then she leant out of the window and picked some roses.'

'My poor boy, I can imagine the rest,' as he paused to take breath.

'Yes, it is easy to imagine it,' he returned hurriedly, 'if you had only seen Aline that evening ; it was an idyll—it fascinated us both ; that dark wainscoted parlour—the girl in her blue dress, offering us the roses. "Will you come again?" that was what she said to me as I went out dizzy and bewildered with the novelty of my sensations.

"What a Ruth !" observed Stewart as we walked down the lane. "I wonder if there be a Boaz in the background—my lady Ruth favours you, Fleming. I heard that pretty whisper just now ; I am half inclined to cut you out, only, you see, I am so uncommonly good-natured. Go in and win, my boy ; it will be rare sport to watch you—haymaking and syllabubs ; tea and ham in the parlour. I had no idea you were such a gay Lothario."

'It was profanation to hear him talk like this. Must there always be a Mephistopheles when Faust meets his Margaret ? Those deep sad eyes haunted me ; the touch of the cool, soft hand still lingered in mine. Hitherto I had been fancy free ; for the first time I felt the tingling of a new passion in my veins. That night before I slept I determined to see her again, and without Stewart.

'From that day I took solitary walks, and they invariably ended at Cross Farm. I had always a kindly welcome from Mrs. White and her husband ; I think they were proud of the handsome girl who was their guest, and a suitor or two were to be expected. They made no objection if I invited Aline to take a stroll with me in the fields to admire the sunset ; sometimes she walked back through the lanes with me.

'Aline always blushed with pleasure when she saw me, but after the first few minutes she invariably relapsed into gravity : she spoke little except in answer to my questions ; but her manner was full of intelligence, and she never repelled me by any vulgarity. She was not a gentlewoman by birth ; that was evident to me at

once. She told me frankly that her brother—her only remaining relative—had a small shop in Holloway.

“George is very kind to me, but I find the life dull,” she said once. “I do not like serving in the shop—the people stare so; I tell George I want to be a governess, but he will not hear of it. He has sent me here that I may get rid of the idea, and also because he is angry with me;” and her eyes filled with tears.

“How I longed to kiss them away! But that evening she would not tell me the reason of her brother’s anger. At times her sadness—her utter despondency—infected me; I felt as though I were under the influence of some power that I could not resist. There were times when I thought I was not in love—when I wanted to break away from her and be free; sometimes I would part with her almost coldly, but in a day or two the desire to see her again, to be near her, would be too strong for me.

“I knew nothing of her real character; she was reserved with me; she neither invited nor permitted any love-making on my part; she liked me, and frankly told me so, but there was no coquetting on her part.

“One day I had driven over to spend an hour with her, when I found her looking flushed and excited; I thought her manner strange.

““George is a tyrant!” she said, as I asked anxiously what was the matter. “He insists on my marrying a man old enough to be my father. He is a grocer, too, but in a large way. He says I have given my word to marry him.”

““Is that true, Aline?”

““Yes, it is true,” she replied, bursting into tears; “but I would rather die than marry him. Basil, if you care for me, why do you not save me from George? I cannot keep my word—I should murder Nathaniel or myself. Oh! you do not know, but it is almost driving me out of my mind! and, Basil, you know you care for me.”

““I love you, dear,” I returned passionately, for she was clinging to me, and sobbing like a broken-hearted child, and her beautiful face was wet with tears. How could I know?—I was only one-and-twenty, and I was not one who knew the ways of women. If I had been a little older—— But there, let me hurry on. I have not been the only headstrong young fool who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

“We settled it all before we parted. The long vacation was approaching, and, contrary to Mr. Fleming’s wishes, I had accepted an invitation to stay with Stewart Morton; his people lived at

Norwood. Aline was going back to Holloway. Nothing could be easier than to procure a license and marry her in the old church in Holloway Road. Her brother was a Dissenter, and so was Nathaniel Jennings.

'We parted from each other very tenderly; I believed, that day at least, that I was ready to lay down my life for Aline Barton. I took Stewart Morton into my confidence; he seemed a little alarmed at the notion of a marriage.

"It will hinder your prospects in life," he said; "is there no way out of this?"

'I almost quarrelled with him at last; he wanted to teach me a little bit of worldly philosophy. He did not believe in women; in his opinion flirtation was a venial sin. If I had listened to him'—and here his face darkened—"but I could not unlearn the lessons of a life. I silenced him at last by telling him roughly that I chose to be a fool rather than a knave; no woman should ever rue the day she saw me; that I was madly in love with Aline, and that I meant to make her my wife.

'He was a little sulky at first; but finally promised to see me through it, as he called it, and I accompanied him to Norwood. I only saw Aline two or three times before we were married. We met on Sunday evenings in the old parish church, and had a stroll together afterwards. She was very quiet and subdued, and very grateful to me for the sacrifice I was making, and each time I left her I was more in love than ever.

'Stewart did not see her again until the day we were married, and then he vowed to me in the vestry that he had never seen a grander-looking bride; and certainly Aline looked her best that day. Her face was colourless, and as she stood at the altar, with downcast eyes and her deep lashes sweeping her cheeks, she was more like a lovely statue than a woman. Once only she raised her eyes to me with a frightened look: it was when I was promising to love and cherish her until death. I felt her hand tremble in mine then. I had taken lodgings at Highgate; through Stewart Morton's influence I had secured a mastership there. Aline was not quite penniless; she had two or three hundred pounds. It was not until the day after my marriage that I wrote to Mr. Fleming. It was rather an off-hand letter; I was too proud to show feeling. I had no reply from him; but one day, when I returned from my morning's work, I found him sitting with Aline.

'The sight of him took my breath away; for a minute I could not speak. He had been ill—he looked thin and worn; but he stretched out his hand to me with his old kind smile.

“So you could not trust me, Basil?” he said, as Aline put down her sewing and went quietly out of the room.

‘I could make him no answer; for the first time the consciousness of my own base ingratitude to this generous benefactor filled me with shame and remorse. How had I repaid this dearest friend of mine for all his loving sacrifice? By disappointing all his hopes of me; by flinging up my prospects in life, and uniting myself to a woman whom a few short weeks of matrimony had convinced me could never be my equal or companion! I stood before him confused and guilty—a prodigal weary already of his husks, yet for whom there could be no consolation.

“My poor boy! we must make the best of it,” he said presently, when, crushed and humiliated by his goodness, my proud reserve gave way. “You must be loyal to your wife, Basil. Never let her think she is not your equal; if she love you, she will soon teach herself to become worthy of her husband.”

‘He stayed with us some time, and shared our midday meal with us. I remember how patiently and gently he tried to win Aline’s confidence; but she was in one of her strange moods, and seemed to have taken a dislike to him. She had already developed a singular jealousy of my friends. When I remonstrated with her after he had left, she said sullenly:

“George is every bit as good and forgiving as Mr. Fleming, but you never ask him to take a meal in the place. You hate to have anything to do with him, because he is not one of your fine gentlemen!”

‘This had been our first matrimonial dispute. Mr. Barton had behaved to us with tolerable generosity. He had stormed a good deal at first, and had called Aline in my presence a sly, good-for-nothing girl; but he had relented at the sight of her tears.

“You have treated Jennings cruel,” he went on; “he is that cut up that he can’t mind his business, and all along of an ungrateful girl who could not keep her word to him. You have behaved as I never thought a girl could have behaved; but it is too late to cry over spilt milk now, and what is done can’t be altered. You have made your bed, and must just lie in it. I wanted to tie you up to a safe man; but you have chosen to fend for yourself.”

“But you will forgive me, George?” sobbed Aline.

‘I hated to see her demean herself to such a fellow; why, he could not even speak his own language, and he was a little insignificant sandy-haired man. The very look of his glossy-black clothes turned me sick; how could he be Aline’s brother? But they were evidently fond of each other.

“Come, come,” clapping her roughly on the back, “don’t

spoil your eyes with crying ; least said soonest mended. We must make the best of a bad job. Bring your husband to have pot-luck with me on Sunday, Allie ; and we will have a crack together."

"Oh, how I grew to loathe that little parlour behind the shop, and those Sunday dinners ! I put a stop to them at last. "If you choose to have George here, well and good," I said one day ; "but I am not going to Holloway every Sunday ; you may go by yourself ;" and Aline sulked, and retaliated by turning a cold shoulder to my friends. Before long I went of my own accord to Holloway. I must tell my story in my own way. I hate this part of my life so much I can hardly bear to speak of it. It was a drenching November evening. I stalked into the shop, looking, I suppose, as cheerful as the Ghost in *Hamlet*. George, who was adding up accounts in his little desk, turned pale when he saw me. "Come into the parlour," he said ; "Smith will mind the shop." I followed him in—I was benumbed with wet and cold ; and he drew up a chair to the fire. "Sit down and have a warm, Fleming," he said quite kindly, though we were not the best of friends. "Becky will bring up the tea-things in a minute ; but there is something you want to tell me first ?"

"Yes, George."

"He rubbed his hands nervously together ; his lips twitched. "You aren't going to tell me that Allie has broken out again ?" he said ; "don't tell me that, for Heaven's sake !"

"I turned and looked at him sternly ; he must have seen the loathing in my face, for he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Don't, old chap ; keep it in ! Allie is your wedded wife, you know. A man is bound to bear with his own flesh and blood."

"If I had known it"—and here I turned on him so fiercely that he recoiled a step or two—"I would have died sooner than marry your sister."

"Ay, ay ! to be sure you would," he replied pityingly ; "but Nat was not of your way of thinking ; he was that fond of Allie that he would have taken her in spite of it. That was why I wanted him to have her, because he knew all about it. If you had come to me and said, 'Barton, I am in love with your sister,' I would have told you the truth, and there would have been an end of it, and Allie would have stopped with me or married Nat Jennings."

"George, what am I to do ? I shall go mad if this goes on ; I have no control over Aline."

"What are you to do ? that beats me, old fellow ;" and he

sat down opposite to me and shook his head disconsolately. "She has been a handful to me, that poor girl has ; but for all that, I never wanted to get rid of her. She is all I have belonging to me ; for I never mean to have chick nor child of my own. Somehow I have always turned against thoughts of matrimony since my cousin Jenny died. Allie has been like my own child, somehow ; for there is twelve years between us ; and I couldn't blame her as I should have done, when I remembered mother."

"I looked at him aghast.

"Do you mean——?"

"He nodded. "Yes, mother and father too ; but mother was the worst ; she died of it at last. I always thought father took to it just out of misery at her goings on. Jenny lived with us then, and folks thought we should have married each other, only she caught malignant smallpox nursing a little servant who was taken ill, and that carried her off."

"George, how old was Aline when you first saw signs of this fearful habit?"

"Well, it might have been a matter of two years or so now. I thought I should have broken my heart that night when I found it out—such a bonnie lass as she was, and so good-humoured and kind when the madness was not on her. Look here, Fleming, I can't stand seeing her own husband turn against Allie. When she was at her worst, and had got to the drink, I was never hard to her. How could she help it, poor girl, when it was in her blood? It was just a madness, and she knew it herself."

"'George,' she would say in one of her penitent moods, 'it comes over me just like madness. I seem to have no power to fight against it. Sometimes I pray about it, but it always masters me in the end. I hate myself for it ; I want to be good, and to have people love me. Perhaps if I go away somewhere—— Why don't you lock me up, and save me in spite of myself?' Poor Allie ! she would be good for a long time after one of these breaks-out—that is why I wanted Nat Jennings to be her husband, because he would have had more patience with her.'"

CHAPTER XXIV

ALINE

'Yet, if I seem to speak of grief,
'Tis scarce worth wonder. I have known
Large losses, dealt in moments brief,
Hide harvests ere their autumn strown.'

PHILIP STANHOPE HARTLEY.

'My career has been one of difficulties, and doubts, and errors.'

Guy Mannering.

At this point Basil's voice suddenly dropped, as though he were weary. He rose and began pacing up and down the narrow point, as though he could no longer control his restlessness. I watched him without speaking. How I longed to stretch out my hand to him, to bid him be comforted.

'Do not lose hope. You are one of us; you are no longer alone in your wretchedness—you have a mother.'

Oh, if I might only say that to him! But he must tell me all first. My poor boy! So this was his dreary fate—to be linked for life to this woman. What bitter news for Virginia! What perplexity for all of us! The moon was rising now, and the pale silvery beams began to play over the water; the air was soft and balmy, and the only sound that reached our ear was the faint ripple of the waves on the sand. Basil suddenly came up to me.

'Are you cold or tired?' he asked abruptly. 'Miss Leigh told me to take care of you. Would you like to go in now, and let me finish this miserable story to-morrow?'

'I could not sleep until I had heard all you have to tell me. Sit down, my—Mr. Fleming. Do you think my heart is not full of pity for all you have suffered? Do you think I do not understand?'

'It was my own fault,' he returned huskily. 'I deserved to be punished, but at times it has seemed to me as though the

punishment were greater than the sin. I was so young, so horribly young and inexperienced, and—and I thought I loved her?’

‘Did you not?’

‘I do not know—perhaps; but my love, such as it was, died a natural death very soon after our marriage. Aline had not been my wife three months before I discovered her fatal habit. I had thought her strange once or twice—a little excited in her manner; but that night—shall I ever forget it?’—with a shiver. ‘I had been spending the evening with Stewart, and had come home late. As I walked up Highgate Hill in the starlight, I thought rather tenderly of my wife. I had not seen her since the morning, and she had seemed a little depressed then.

“I do not like you to be out so much, Basil,” she had said to me. “There are times when I am afraid of being left to myself. If I had said that to George, he would have given up any pleasure to stop with me.”

‘I disliked this allusion to her brother, and answered her rather coldly:

“George Barton and I are very different men. I am sorry you feel dull, Aline, but I cannot break my engagement with Stewart.”

“That is what you always say,” she returned rather sullenly. “You care for Mr. Morton more than you do for me; and yet I am your wedded wife. I am not clever and amusing like your other friends, and so you get tired of me.”

“I wish you would not talk such nonsense, you silly child!” I replied, trying to laugh off this.

‘But Aline was not to be soothed. She did not return my kiss as usual, and though she followed me to the door she had no parting smile or word for me. I thought privately that she was in a bad humour. Her absurd jealousy of my Oxford friends already tried me a good deal.

‘I always let myself in with a latch-key. It was long past midnight, and I was surprised to see a light burning in the parlour. How foolish of Aline to be sitting up for me! I thought; and yet the little attention pleased me. I went in with a smile on my lips. What a sight met my eyes! The fire was out, one guttering candle was on the table; the other had burnt itself out. Aline was lying half across the table, with her flushed face pillowed on her arms. Could she be asleep—ill? What did that strange spirituous smell mean?

‘As I stood on the threshold unable to realise the true meaning of the case, she opened her eyes, and with a stupid, vacant stare

came unsteadily across the floor to me. Good Heavens! I believe that sight nearly drove me mad in my horror. I pushed her from me with a curse, and she fell heavily to the floor.'

'You hurt her, Basil!'

'Nothing hurt her that night. She only grovelled at my feet, and begged me not to be angry, but I was almost beside myself. I dragged her up, and made her go up to her room, but I had to carry her at last. I saw her throw herself upon her bed, and locked her in, and went downstairs. I spent the remainder of the night walking up and down like a caged thing. How was I to bear my life beside her? Miss Sefton, I believe only one thing kept me from blowing out my brains in the cold gray morning, and that was the thought of my adopted father. How could I bring this grief on him? No, I deserved punishment. I must bear the hideous fate I had brought on myself. I must bear with the woman I had made my wife. Yes, it was the thought of that true gentleman, Robert Fleming—his tender love, his stainless life—that shielded me in that awful hour, and brought me to my knees sobbing like a child.

'I left the house the next morning without seeing Aline. I had my school duties to perform. When our little maid brought in my breakfast, I told her to look after her mistress. "I am afraid she is ill," I stammered.

'When the time for my return approached, a feeling of disgust and sickness oppressed me. As I drew near the house my pace slackened. How was I to confront Aline? She did not come to meet me as usual. I had not expected it. The little parlour was in its usual order. The fire burnt brightly. A shaded lamp was on the table. The kettle was hissing and bubbling on its brass trivet. The tea-things were arranged. A little bouquet of chrysanthemums and brown leaves lay beside my plate. An appetising smell of hot cakes came from the kitchen. For one moment I felt as though the hideous spectacle of last night were a dream. Then Aline entered.

'She came up slowly to the table, and stood leaning on it with one hand. She looked very white and ill, and her eyes were swollen with weeping.

'"Basil——" she began, and then stopped as though afraid to say more.

'"What have you to say to me?" I asked sternly; for even her grief-stricken aspect did not soften me in the least.

'"I have to ask your pardon," and then, bursting into wild weeping, she sank on the floor before me. "Oh, Basil, Basil, don't be so hard with me! I have tried; indeed, I have tried;

but the temptation was too strong, and you left me alone. Oh, I would rather you killed me than look at me like that, as though you loathed the sight of me! It is not my fault—ask George. George knows, and he is always so good to me. Oh, why did I ever leave him?—why did you make me care for you? I ought not to have let you marry me, but I was so afraid that George would force me to have Nat Jennings.”

“Aline, will you get up and listen to me?”

“No, not until you say you will forgive me. Basil, you are my husband. You must help me to overcome this dreadful habit. I am young—I must get over it. I will—I must. I hate myself for doing it, but now and then the devil tempts me. Basil dear, only forgive me this once, and I will never offend you again.”

“What could I do? She was my wife, and she looked so lovely, kneeling there with the tears rolling down her face. How could I help at last taking her in my arms? She was so very gentle and humble that night. She listened to me as meekly as a child while I talked to her. I told her that, of all sins, this was the most repellant to me—the one I judged most harshly.

“Other vices are bad enough,” I said; “but this degrades the whole moral sense. It drags a man down below the level of a beast. Aline, you have inflicted a fatal stab to my love. I can never think of you as I did yesterday. If this went on, I could not answer for the consequences.”

““Would you grow to hate me?” she whispered, and a great sadness, almost a despairing look, came into her beautiful eyes, and then she covered my hands with kisses. “Oh, Basil, do not hate me! I love you so much, and I want to please you.”

“Then you must promise me never to taste the accursed stuff again. Promise me now, Aline.”

“She gave me the promise gladly, and seemed as happy as a child when I kissed her; nothing could exceed her sweetness that night. She hung about me, and coaxed me all the evening. George came to see us the next day, and on the following Mr. Fleming surprised us by a second visit. I said nothing to either of them. Aline was on her best behaviour. She was gracious—charming. She sent George away perfectly satisfied. Stewart called in the next week, and she made much of him, and asked him to come again. When he left, and I was chatting with him on the doorstep, he said to me:

“I begin to think you are a lucky fellow, Fleming! That wife of yours grows handsomer every time I see her.”

“A month or two passed in tolerable tranquillity. I never left Aline now. I spent the evenings reading to her. On half-holidays,

when I was free, I took her for a walk. I had reason to be more than usually considerate; we hoped in the early summer that Aline would become a mother. Her health was a little delicate just now; she was liable to fits of depression, and I did not find it always easy to cheer her. Once or twice, as the winter went on, I had a vague suspicion that things were not quite right; but I was not sure. One night I was detained at school, helping the head-master with some accounts. I had begged Aline to go to bed early, and she had promised to do so. The house was quite dark, as I let myself in, and I went softly upstairs. As I entered our room, my heart died within me. Aline was stretched on the bed fully dressed. There was no need to ask this time if she were ill. I did not disturb her; cold as a stone, and with a sense of despair that seemed to crush the youth out of me, I went downstairs, and, rekindling the smouldering embers, threw myself down on the hearthrug, and lay until morning.

‘The next evening there were tears and reproaches again. Aline was so ill with her penitence that I grew frightened at last. I must be more careful with her; but I was losing heart now. On the third relapse, I went to George; I have told you how he comforted me.

‘The summer came, and Reggie was born; and for a few months love for her child, and gratitude for my attentions, kept Aline straight; but by and by the old madness broke out again. Alas! I knew now that it was madness—an hereditary taint was in her blood. We tried every means, George and I; we watched her, kept her amused, and for two or three months no one could be more reasonable. Then I would leave her some morning standing smiling at the door, with her boy in her arms, looking like the picture of some grand, pale Madonna, and in the evening she would meet me with the raised look of a sleep-walker in her eyes.

‘How she ever obtained the drugs that were destroying her we never knew; but stories of the lady at Myrtle Cottage were rife in the neighbourhood. When things got worse, I was obliged to resign my post; the place had grown too hot for us.’

‘But surely you let Mr. Fleming know of your trouble?’

He shook his head.

‘No, I never could bring myself to tell him; and after a time he discontinued his visits. Aline had taken a strong dislike to him—she was always susceptible to these strange jealousies. At last I begged him not to come.

‘“We are better apart just now,” I said; “it is not pleasant for me to see my friends ignored by my wife, and I cannot bear

to see you treated as Aline treats you ;” and he acquiesced sorrowfully.

‘I was glad when he kept away ; I could not bear that he should see my degradation. He used to send me money sometimes, but I always returned it. I would write to him now and then, and tell him about Reggie—his beauty, his cleverness, his winning little ways ; but I said little about my wife. After a time my letters grew fewer. I told him that for the present we were living with Mr. Barton ; but I gave him no reason for the change. He wrote back and implored me to tell him more—to come and see him—to let him assist me ; but my answer was curt, and I fear ungracious, and after that he let me alone.

‘Since I have been at St. Croix, I have written and told him everything. When I go back to England I mean to take Reggie to see him.’

‘That is right,’ I murmured.

‘Yes, better late than never ; poor old man ! he is terribly cut up about it all.

‘Well, it was after our baby-girl died that George made us come and live with him. I could not get another mastership, and was only earning a scanty maintenance by writing articles and reviewing books. Aline’s few hundred pounds had long gone. George represented to us that he was not a rich man ; the shop at Holloway was all he had.

‘“Allie is the only creature I have belonging to me in the world,” he said ; “and I can’t see her pinched while I am alive. If you can put up with a humble place, Fleming, you are welcome to what I have. Allie and the boy will be safe with me ; and you will have a roof to call your own while you are looking out for work.”

‘Things were at such a low ebb with us just then that I could not well refuse George. My affection for Aline was a thing of the past now, and all my love was centred upon Reggie. From baby-hood he had been constantly with me ; even before he could speak he would hold out his arms, and cry to come to me. He soon made it evident that he preferred my society to his mother’s. Sometimes I had to take him out of his crib, and, wrapping him up in an old shawl, carry him downstairs. Nothing else would satisfy him, and he would lie contentedly in my arms while I read or wrote until he fell asleep. I never could quite understand Aline’s feelings with regard to the child. Sometimes she appeared indifferent to him. Now and then in her irritable moods she seemed as though she could not endure the sight of him. I believe that after a time she grew jealous of my fondness for him,

and never willingly caressed him in my presence ; but more than once, when she thought herself alone, I have seen her snatch him up and cover him with kisses, while he struggled to get away from her.

“Mother kisses Reggie too hard,” I heard him say once.

‘We had a very good nurse for him for two years. George’s thoughtfulness provided this comfort, for Aline could not be safely trusted with the care of her child. Reggie was always happy with her, and until she died——’

I interrupted him.

‘Wait one minute, please ; I want to ask you a question. Did Reggie call her mammie?’

‘Yes ; how did you know that?’ he returned in surprise. ‘Reggie was very fond of her. I think he cared for her far more than for his own mother, and it was a great loss to us when she died, and George told us that he could not afford another nurse. I was never happy then if Reggie were out of my sight.

‘It cost me a bitter struggle before I could make up my mind to go and live at Holloway ; but I could not let Aline and Reggie starve. The thought of the little parlour behind the shop gave me a sick feeling. There was a room upstairs with two windows looking down on Holloway Road, which was given up to Aline ; but all the meals were taken in the parlour. Rebecca, the elderly maid-of-all-work, who had lived with George for the last fifteen years—a red-haired, large-boned woman—would lay the table in her usual noisy fashion : the willow-pattern plates, the big clumsy knives, were repugnant to me. Rebecca’s turned-up sleeves, her dirty apron, her rough, uncouth ways, were all separate sources of offence ; but I learnt to be grateful even to Rebecca, when I saw how wisely and kindly she dealt with Aline in her attacks. She had a man’s strength, and would carry her in her arms like a child.

“You may leave her to Becky,” George would say ; “Becky understands Allie perfectly.”

‘My surroundings were intolerable to me. I had been used to Mr. Fleming’s refined and cultured conversation, and my year at Exeter had still more unfitted me for the society of a man like George Barton. After a time I could not endure my life, and I was obliged at last to find a retreat where I could read and write quietly without distraction.

‘In my walks about Highgate I had discovered a little cottage where a worthy old couple lived, with whom Reggie and I made friends. In return for a trifling weekly sum they agreed to allow me the use of an empty room. I sent in a few articles of furni-

ture, laid up a little store of wood and coal in an outhouse, and every morning, as soon as George and I had finished our early breakfast—Aline never appeared until long afterwards—I dressed Reggie, and we set off for Laurel Cottage. We spent the whole day there. On my way I purchased provisions for our midday meal; sometimes ready-dressed from a cook's shop, or else I broiled our chops or steak on an old gridiron Mrs. Jones lent us.

‘Reggie played about happily while I wrote my articles and reviews. When he was tired he would clamber up on my knee and sit quietly, turning over his picture-book. He quite understood that I must not be disturbed. Sometimes his head would drop against my shoulder and his eyes close. I would let him stay until my arm got cramped, and then lay him down on a rug at my feet, where he would sleep for an hour or two. He never gave me any trouble, but always seemed perfectly happy and contented. A few bricks, a Noah's ark, and a little cart were his only playthings; but when it was warm enough he would be running about the little garden half the day, building a grotto with some oyster-shells, or digging beside old Jones, and making belief to help him. Dear little chap, he was just the sunshine of my life! I do think Aline was right when she said once that he was more my child than hers.

‘Sometimes when I played with him, or hunted butterflies, or picked flowers in the lanes, I forgot all about Holloway; but it was always the worst hour in the twenty-four when I went back to it. When the evenings were cold I wrapped Reggie in an old rug and carried him all the way home. He used to burrow in it like a rabbit, and I could just see his bright eyes peeping out of the folds. He never came to any harm; I think the free life suited him as well as it did me.

‘George would look up and nod a welcome to us as we passed through the shop; but Aline generally received us rather sulkily:

“‘So you have come back,” she would say; “I suppose Reggie wants his tea;” but she never seemed to take any pleasure in waiting on him. Oftener than not, Rebecca would put him to bed. Aline was not always disposed to leave the warm parlour and the fireside. “George would be coming in for his tea,” she would observe, “and he liked to see her there.” It was always George—never me or the boy. I used to think at last she did not care for either of us, and yet she was the mother of my Reggie!

‘I could not spend the evening, with George coming in and out, talking to Aline as she sat at her work; the tinkling of the shop-bell and the footsteps of the customers irritated me too much.

Besides, Aline and I had little to say to each other. I used to wait until Reggie was in bed, and run up and say good-night to him, and then go out and prowls about the streets for hours. It was strange, lonely work, but I liked it somehow. I saw plenty of life, only it was of the humbler sort. Sometimes, when the mood was on me, I would walk into London. I never returned until late. Aline was always in bed, but George would be sitting by the fire smoking and reading his newspaper. The remains of the frugal supper would be still on the table.

"Help yourself, old fellow," he would say. "Allie has gone to bed, and I am just finishing my last pipe. Becky has gone up, too, but I will go down to the cellar and draw you another mug of ale, if you want it."

"Poor old George! he was always the same—good-humoured and cheery, and ready at any moment for a "jaw," as he called it, but I would not often be drawn into an argument. He was, like all Dissenters of his class and standing, narrow-minded and intolerant and full of prejudices. I used to compare him sometimes in my own mind to Mr. Fleming, or even to Stewart Morton, and wondered what Stewart would have said to him.

"I am afraid I treated him very badly, but he bore all my snubs with the same cheery good-humour. I think his one fear was that I should break away from Aline altogether. He had a sort of pride in his own way, and as long as he could keep the peace between us, and things were outwardly smooth, he seemed satisfied. I am sure in his own heart he was sorry for me. He never objected to my long absences, and always explained them in his own fashion. I heard him talking once to his friend Jennings. I suppose the latter had been somewhat inquisitive.

"No, he doesn't work here. You see, with the customers coming and going, there is no sort of quiet. He has a room a little way out where he writes; it is like a gent going to his office."

"But he is out all the evening, too. I wonder Allie likes it!"—replied Jennings, who still took an interest in his former sweetheart.

"I could have flung him out of the shop as I heard him, but George did not seem the least embarrassed by this cross-examination.

"Well, you see, Nat, Allie is a sensible lass, for all her failings, as is known between you and me. She knows the lad is a good bit tried with her goings on, and wants exercise after his writing. He is a rare walker, is Fleming."

"Humph!" was all Jennings's reply.

‘I wonder if George’s explanation satisfied him ; no doubt he thought I neglected Aline shamefully. I was in a bad temper that evening, and when George came into the parlour I said a contemptuous word about Jennings.

“It strikes me as rather bad taste that he should always be coming round after what has passed between him and Aline,” I said ; for a man is always touchy about his wife, and though I did not love Aline, I would not allow any old sweethearts to come after her.

‘To my surprise, George quite brightened up at my brusque speech.

“I don’t mind your saying that a bit, Fleming,” he returned ; “it shows you have some sort of feeling for poor Allie. Bless your heart ! Allie is barely civil to him ; she never holds her head higher than when Nat is here, so there is no call for you to be jealous. With all her faults, she knows her duty too well for that.”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself,” I answered coldly. “I am not the least jealous of Nat Jennings or of any other man.”

“Of course not,” he replied briskly. “You are quite right there, my lad, for Aline never looked at any man but you—not in the way of loving him, I mean. As for Nat—poor old beggar !—I am precious sorry for him ; he can’t get over the loss of Allie. But there, it was not to be, and Allie is safe with me ;” and with a sigh he went off to shut up the shop.

‘Now—would you believe it ?—I was such a fool that I must needs go upstairs and hector Aline on the subject.

“Nat Jennings comes here too often,” I said to her. “I have just told George so. I hate a fellow to come sneaking round where he is not wanted.”

“There is no reason for calling him names, or speaking to George, either ; and you will wake Reggie if you talk so loud,” was her only reply, and I dropped my voice at once.

“All the same, Aline, I tell you I will not have the fellow round here so often.”

“You must tell George that,” she returned, with a dignity that somehow became her. “It is not my affair, nor yours either—Nat is his friend.”

“But he used to be yours,” I retorted sulkily ; “what is the use of denying it ?”

‘Aline flushed. “What has come over you to-night, Basil ? What does it matter to you if any one looks at me or not ? I thought that sort of thing did not interest you much now. It is quite true I took up with Nat once to please George ; but I never

could fancy him, as I told you. It is not likely I should trouble my head about him now, when I have married another man."

"But I was not quite mollified. "That is all very well as far as it goes ; but you see, Aline, he may trouble his head about you, and I could not put up with that for a moment."

"She looked at me rather oddly, and the old wistful, tender look came into her eyes. "Thank you, Basil, for caring about it so ; but there is no need ;" and she turned away. I was half tempted to follow her and give her a kiss, for she had answered me gently, and looked like the old Aline ; but she left the room. I think things might have been a little better after that, only a few days afterwards Aline had one of her breaks-out, and then everything was wrong again.

"My literary work had brought me in a little money, and this summer I determined to give myself a holiday. I told Aline that I was going to take Reggie abroad. As usual, she made no objection, and though George looked grave and shook his head at the notion, I refused to listen to him for a moment. "I must have thorough change of scene," I observed irritably ; "for the last month or two I have felt nearly mad. Aline will be quite happy with you ; she will not miss the boy, and I must take him. I could not go without Reggie."

"It is not my place to find fault with you, lad," he answered sadly. "Yes, you may leave Allie with me ; but you are wrong about her not missing the child."

"Why, do you mean she really cares so much for Reggie?"

"Well, she is the little chap's mother, isn't she?" with a rough sort of pathos. "I tell you what, Fleming : you don't understand Allie as well as I do ; she isn't without her conscience ; she knows what a burden she is to you, and she tries to make up to you by sparing Reggie. Why, when you are gone she will just cry her eyes out, and then fly to the drugs for comfort ; that is what she always does when she is unhappy. I see you don't believe me, lad ; but it is my opinion, and Becky's too, that she is as fond of you both as possible. I have seen her watching you when you and the little chap were hugging each other, with her eyes quite full of tears ;" but I would not believe him. Aline showed no special feeling when we took leave of her. Her eyes were quite dry when she packed Reggie's things, and when I put him in her arms, and he kissed and stroked her face in his pretty way, she gave him back to me as quietly as possible.

"There ! I have told you all. I have kept nothing back, Miss Sefton. I am only six-and-twenty, and yet my fate has been such

that I have grown weary of my life. O God ! when I think of what I might have been, and what I am——' and with a groan he was about to spring to his feet ; but I laid my hand on his arm.

'Basil,' I said, 'do not go yet ; it is my turn now.'

CHAPTER XXV

‘YOU ARE BASIL LYNDHURST!’

‘Let us not burden our remembrances
With a heaviness that’s gone.’

Tempest.

‘Courage and comfort! All shall yet go well.’

King John.

I HAD spoken in a somewhat agitated tone, and Basil seemed perplexed at my manner. ‘Miss Leigh is right,’ he said anxiously; ‘and you are very tired. I can feel that you are trembling all over. Why did you let me talk so long? it must be nearly nine o’clock. Look how bright the moonlight is! indeed I cannot allow you to sit any longer.’

He spoke with such gentle insistence that I could not refuse to rise; but I still detained him.

‘I cannot go back yet. Olga will be there, and I must speak to you alone. If I am tired I do not know it; I am thinking of other things. I have heard it all now. My poor boy, how you have suffered! And then your wife! It is all so sad—and to know it is for life.’

‘Yes, it is for life,’ he answered gloomily.

‘Oh, my dear, do not speak in that tone! You have great troubles; but there may be consolations.’

‘You are very good to try and comfort me,’ he replied quietly. ‘It is your kind heart and your sympathy that prompt you to speak of comfort; but while Aline lives——’ He stopped abruptly.

‘Do not let us speak of her—not just yet; you have your cross, but there may be blessings in store for you. Basil, I want to tell you something, only I am afraid of startling you. What if I have found out something about your past life that you do not know yourself—about your father and——’

'My father!' he exclaimed before I could finish my sentence—'my father, who cared so little about me that he gave me up to a stranger!' And then he added bitterly: 'Mr. Fleming is the only father I ever knew.'

My heart sank when I heard him speak in that tone; his mother had forsaken him too! I trembled as I thought of Virginia. For a moment I hardly knew what to say, and all the time he was looking at me so keenly.

'Do you mean that you knew my father?' he asked presently.

'Yes, I knew him. He made the life of one very dear to me so wretched that death would have been a relief; but he is dead now. We must not judge those who are gone. But for your broken-hearted mother——'

'She is dead too,' he returned quickly; 'she died when I was a baby. Mr. Fleming told me so.'

Some one had lied to him, then.

'Basil, your mother is not dead! All these years she has been seeking her son!'

In the clear, white light I saw his face change; he started violently.

'I do not understand you. Why do you say such strange things to me? My mother!—I have no mother! You are making some mistake.'

'I am making no mistake,' I repeated calmly. 'All these weeks you have interested me; but to-day I have found out the reason. To-morrow you must come with me to the cemetery at St. Croix, and we will stand together at your father's grave, and I will tell you then about your mother.'

'You must tell me now,' he returned, and his tone betrayed strong emotion. 'You have said too much and too little. If you knew my parents—and something in your manner assures me that you are speaking the truth—you must know their name and mine. Who am I, then?'

I took his hands, and held them as I answered him.

'You are Basil Lyndhurst!' I said. 'You are the son of my only sister, the grandson and heir of my father, Ralph Sefton!'

He clutched my hands so tightly that I winced with the pain. 'Good God!' was all he could say for the moment. I could see it was impossible for him to realise it.

'You are my nephew, Basil.'

'Am I?' and then he drew his hands away, and walked to the end of the point.

'I think his emotion was so great that he could not speak to me. He stood quite still and motionless for a few minutes, with

his arms folded across his chest and his head bent. Then he came back to me, and, even in that light, I could see the excited look in his eyes.

'I want the proofs; you must tell me all—everything! There must be nothing kept back from me, not one word, if this be true!' and his chest heaved; it was difficult for him to restrain himself to speak calmly.

'It is true; but I cannot tell you all to-night. I am growing weary—I must confess it now—the strain has been too great. Basil, it is a great thing that I have told you. I do not think you have realised it—that you are your grandfather's heir, and the master of Brookfield Hall.'

'You said something like that before,' he returned uneasily. 'No, I do not realise it; I feel as though I were dreaming, Miss Sefton.'

'You must call me Aunt Catherine. Basil, my dear, you are one of us—you are my boy now.'

Then he broke down utterly.

'Oh,' he said, when he had recovered himself a little, and we were walking slowly up the common, 'it is the thought that I have some one belonging to me that unmans me so. To think that it is you—you who have saved my boy's life—who now claim me as a nephew; that I have a mother who has been thinking of me all these years—it is too much! too much!'

'And your home, Basil—the beautiful home you have never seen?'

'I cannot take it in to-night,' he returned in a bewildered tone. 'It is your house, is it not, Aunt Catherine?'

He hesitated shyly over the last words; but I felt such a thrill of pride as I heard him say it.

'No; it is yours,' I answered quietly; 'but your grandfather stipulated that it should be your mother's home for life, and mine, if we wished it. But it is a great house, Basil! There is one wing that has always gone by the name of the Dower House.'

'What do you mean?' he returned quickly. 'Is it possible that you think——? But I will not discuss that to-night. Why do you hint at such things when my brain is almost reeling? You do not know what it is to me to feel that there is such a home for Reggie in the future; that the shop at Holloway will be a nightmare of the past! Do you mean'—and here his voice shook again—'that that is all over for ever, and that I am not to go home night after night to see George smoking in his shirt-sleeves? Oh, good Heavens! when I think of my life there! And you talk to me as though I were going to turn you out of your home; and I am to believe you, and not think it is all a dream!'

He was so agitated that I had some trouble to quiet him. He complained at last that I told him so little about his mother. I had some difficulty in evading his questions.

'It is so late, and I am tired out, Basil. To-morrow we will have a long talk. If I began about Virginia, I should not end until midnight; but I will tell you as much as this—she is a great invalid. All her youth and strength have been crushed out of her; her life has been an unhappy one; her troubles have affected her nerves; she is old and weak, and needs a son's tenderness.'

'She shall have it,' he answered; and I could see his eyes were glistening, and then neither of us said more until we reached *La Maisonnette*.

He seemed as though he meant to leave me—perhaps he thought I was too weary; but I drew him in.

'I cannot part with you just yet, and you have not tasted food for hours, and Olga will be waiting to congratulate you.'

But he did not require pressing.

'I wanted to come in,' he said simply. 'I felt as though I must see Reggie. Ah! there is Miss Leigh; she has been watching for us.'

Olga was standing outside the glass door of the *salle-à-manger*. She looked at us anxiously as we entered.

'Well, Aunt Catherine?' was all she said.

I was about to answer to explain, when Basil put me aside quite unceremoniously.

'Miss Leigh,' he said eagerly, 'she is my Aunt Catherine now.'

'Yes, I know;' and Olga held out her hand to him with one of her sweetest smiles. 'You are Basil—the long-lost Basil; for whom they have been seeking all these years. Oh, I am so glad. And you and Reggie—dear little Reggie!—will come to live at the Hall.'

I think those few simple words, said so cordially, did more to convince Basil of the truth than all my explanations. The bewildered look left his face; he grew calmer. As he grasped her hand, he said quickly:

'You live at Brookfield, too?'

'Yes; I am so glad. And you will know Jen, and Hubert, and Kitty; and the children will play with Reggie. Fancy Reggie and Girlie together, Aunt Catherine! Oh, it is too delightful!'

I wondered what made Basil turn his back suddenly and walk to the window. A minute afterwards he said he would go up to Reggie. Olga came and knelt down beside me directly we were left alone.

'Are you very glad, dear Aunt Catherine?' she asked gently. I think my answer must have satisfied her. 'And Basil—I suppose I must call him Mr. Lyndhurst now—he looks very pale.'

'It is with happiness. Oh, what a life he has had, poor boy! Olga, I must tell you all about it some day. His wife——'

'What of his wife?' she asked quickly.

'That is what I cannot tell you now. But she is unworthy of him; and she makes him very unhappy.'

'There is all the more need for his mother to comfort him. I always knew he was unhappy—that is why I was so sorry for him. And he is poor, too; and I suppose his home is uncongenial to him. Poor Mr. Lyndhurst! But he will have you, Aunt Catherine. Oh, how proud he looked when he called you that!'

We talked a little more, for it was some time before Basil returned, and then we sat down to supper. I think Olga was the only one who spoke much. She was gay, vivacious, charming; our silence did not subdue her in the least. She insisted on giving Basil a full description of the Hall. I am sure she did it on purpose, because she saw how strongly he was moved. She talked about the Lady's Walk, and related the Lady Gwendoline's story. She even mentioned the peacocks, which she said would be such a delight to Reggie.

'Reggie will have the old nursery, will he not, Aunt Catherine?' she said presently. 'It is papered so prettily, and has such a lovely view.'

Once she called him Mr. Lyndhurst, and I saw Basil start and flush.

'I do not know my new name yet,' he said, trying to laugh. 'I think I prefer Basil at present.'

'Mr. Basil, then,' she said, smiling at him. 'Your grandfather's name was Ralph; but he was not a bit like Ralph of the Iron-heart. Aunt Catherine, you ought to have been called Gwendoline; but, indeed, it would have suited Mrs. Lyndhurst best.'

'Do you mean my mother?' he asked, in a low voice.

'Yes, but her name is Virginia. How strange that her husband was Paul!' and so she talked on.

Basil seemed to listen in a sort of trance. Now and then he put in a word, a suggestion, a question. As for me, I could not eat; I sat with my hands on my lap, thinking of Virginia and looking at her boy and mine. It was late before Basil went away; I wanted him to stay, but he said for this one night he would rather go back to the pavilion. He was too restless to sleep; he wanted to prowl about, to smoke in the moonlight.

No house could hold him in such a mood, so I was obliged to let him go.

'But I may come in to breakfast, may I not?' he said, as he bade me good-night; 'and afterwards we will have that talk;' and then Olga and I stood at the door and watched him striding down the path to the little gate.

'Aunt Catherine, what will Jem say?' was Olga's last question that night.

I was worn out, but I could not sleep until daylight; the thought of the letter I had to write to Virginia, and of my impending talk with Basil, drove all drowsiness from my eyes. How was I to make him understand Virginia's timid and morbid nature? Would he believe in the mother who, in her nervous panic, had abandoned her child? I felt I had not yet surmounted all my difficulties; another thought kept me restless. Would it not be necessary to see Robert Fleming? Did we not owe him a full explanation? Besides which, a verification of facts on his side would be satisfactory to us both. He must know the whole truth about his adopted son; he must receive our thanks for those years of care and tenderness. And as I remembered them, I felt that Basil, as the adopted son of Robert Fleming, was dearer to me than ever.

Yes, it was this last thought—why should I deny it?—that kept me wakeful. One day before long Robert Fleming and I would meet again—once more in this life, thank God! I should look in his true face again; we who had once been lovers would grasp hands as friends. I dismissed these agitating reflections at last, and again the thought of Basil's dark face glowing with happiness stole across my mind—my boy as well as Virginia's! Our lonely days were over now. It was no stranger whom I should present to her, but one whom I already loved, whom I was beginning to understand. 'He is already one of us,' I said to myself, as the happy tears came to my eyes in the darkness; and as I remembered Reggie, my cup seemed full to overflowing.

I dressed myself early the next morning, and waited for Basil; I was impatient to see him again. When I heard the click of the little gate I went out in the sunshine to meet him. I had expected a joyous greeting. To my surprise, his face had the same white shaken look it had worn when I first spoke to him; there was a haggardness about him, as though he had not slept. As I took his hand, it felt weak and nerveless as a little child's.

'Basil, my dear boy, are you ill?'

'No,' he returned in a low, vehement voice that increased my apprehension; 'but I have been thinking about it all night, and

I am convinced it must be a mistake. You have told me nothing—there has been no proof, no certainty; it is this that tortures me—that I cannot bear. If it should be all a mistake!’

‘It is no mistake, Basil, I am sure—quite sure—or I would not have told you. In an hour or two you shall hear everything. Will you not trust me until then?’

My quiet voice seemed to soothe him; he spoke more calmly.

‘I thought the night would never end. I felt as though I could not wait until morning. If it should not be true, and I must go back to that life, how could I endure it? Would not everything be worse—more unbearable? In the moonlight I was picturing it all as Miss Leigh described it. I seemed to see it in a dream—the old Hall, the Ghost Walk, the avenue, and the rooks cawing overhead. I could fancy Reggie running over the lawns—just fancy the little chap I carried in my old rug down Highgate Hill!—and then I thought of my mother—and if it should not be true!’ and he set his teeth hard.

‘Basil,’ I said gently, ‘it is true. You are distressing yourself to no purpose; it is just a nervous fancy because you have not slept. I want you to do something for me—I want you to come in now and take your breakfast quietly. I do not wish Olga to see the state you are in; it would trouble her so much. I have ordered Jules to be round at ten o’clock, and we will drive down to the cemetery; and when we have found your father’s grave I will tell you all I know.’

I am sure my calmness gave him courage, for he made a strong effort to carry out my wishes; and though he could not eat, and spoke very little, Olga did not seem to perceive there was anything amiss. It did us both good to see her sitting there and looking so cheerful and serene; a sort of halo of youth and purity seemed to surround her; her large, clear eyes were beaming with kindness.

‘Mr. Basil,’ she said in her simple direct way, ‘I am sure Reggie is almost well now; he has been laughing and talking this morning, and he wants to be dressed immediately and to go down to the bay; for he says all the little fishes miss him.’

We tried to laugh at this little speech, but in spite of all Olga’s efforts the conversation flagged. I was glad when the meal was over, and Basil went up to his boy. He did not come down until the fiacre was at the gate. The drive was taken almost in silence, and it seemed long before we reached the cemetery.

Père Lefevre had given me implicit directions. Before many minutes had passed I conducted Basil to the spot. There was a

little mound, with a black wooden cross at the head; some kind soul had hung a wreath of yellow immortelles on it. There was the name 'Paul Lyndhurst,' and 'R.I.P.'—that was all. Basil had become very quiet; he took my hand and led me to a little bench placed in a shady corner; no one was in the cemetery; we had it to ourselves.

'Will you begin from the beginning?' he said gravely; and then, leaning his elbows on his knees, he composed himself to listen.

It was a long story, but I managed to tell him everything; he only interrupted me once.

'I will see Monsieur Lefevre myself—that will be best; the entry of my baptism must be found at St. Sulpice.'

This was all he said from the beginning to the end.

My voice faltered a little when I first spoke of Virginia, but I suppressed nothing: he was a full-grown man; he must know the whole truth. I disguised nothing—her panic, her wild flight, her anguished repentance. I tried to make him see it with my eyes; I drew a touching picture of her loneliness, her broken health, her wanderings in the Lady's Walk, her nightly prayers for her son.

'Basil, she lives for you,' I finished; 'she has no other thought in life. But for this hope of finding you her frail existence must have ended long ago; it is for you to make up to her for these years of unutterable sorrow.'

He did not seem as though he heard me; his head was still buried in his hands; he did not move until my voice died away into silence—I had nothing more to say; then he started up and stretched his arms over his head.

'It is true, then? Oh, Aunt Catherine!' and then he took my hand and kissed it.

His face was very grave—almost stern; but I saw by his eyes that he doubted no longer.

'You acknowledge that you are Basil Lyndhurst, and the grandson of Ralph Sefton.'

'Yes; I am not such a fool as to disbelieve it any longer. I will see Monsieur Lefevre. Oh, if we could only find Lizette! And then I must write to Mr. Fleming. Aunt Catherine, he must be the first to hear—he comes before my mother.'

He spoke the last word in a hesitating way; his manner did not please me.

'Oh, Basil! not before your mother.'

'Yes,' he said, and a dark flush crossed his face—a flush of extreme pain; 'you must not think me hard if I say so; I have a strange nature; I shall find it difficult to forget what you have

told me.' I was silent; how was I to answer him? The next minute I saw him look at me with great affection. 'Oh, if you were my mother!' he murmured, and his eyes were full of tears.

'Dear Basil, when you see her you will love her too.'

'I hope so,' but there was no conviction in his tone. 'Last night I was thinking of her—oh, so tenderly! I kept saying "mother" to myself, just to hear how it sounded; but the feeling has got chilled somehow.'

'It will pass—believe me, it will pass; your mother is a good woman.'

'She was very weak,' he replied gravely. 'Look here, Aunt Catherine, I have a little chap of my own; I can put myself in her place: could I ever have left Reggie?'

'You are a man—you have a man's strength; Virginia was a weak girl.'

'Miss Leigh is a girl, too. Do you think—— But what am I saying? There are not many like her.'

'Perhaps not; she is very good. But, Basil, she is fond of your mother.'

'Is she?' and his face lighted up. 'But, then, she likes every one—that is just her goodness. Aunt Catherine, please do not look so sad; of course I mean to be good to my mother; do you think I shall reproach her? Only when I think of Reggie, and then of that poor little lonely chap in the garret, I somehow feel as though an impassable gulf separated me from my mother.'

His face had settled into sternness again; but how was I to reason with him?

'And there is Aline,' he continued after another silence; 'what will my mother say to her?'

'She will be sorry, of course; but she will receive her kindly and make the best of her.'

'I doubt if it will answer,' he returned gloomily; 'I cannot imagine Aline at the Hall. She will disturb your peace and my mother's; she is a strange being. She will not assimilate herself to your ways; perhaps if I go away——'

'Go away, and you are the master, Basil! Do you know it all belongs to you? All these years I have been nursing the estate, and saying to myself, "It is for Basil," and you would leave us to our loneliness!'

'I do not wish to leave you,' he replied tenderly; 'it is of you I am thinking, not myself. I cannot bear to think that my wife may bring trouble!'

'We cannot help all that,' I answered quickly; 'it is her right.'

We cannot rob her of her prerogative. Where you and the child are, Aline must be !'

'I suppose so,' he replied in a troubled tone ; 'but she would be happier with George.'

'The house is large enough for all,' was my answer. 'Do you remember what I told you last night, Basil? There is a wing that has always been used as a dower-house. There is plenty of room there for Virginia and me. We shall not be in Aline's way or yours.'

He made no reply ; but after a minute he rose and began to pace the walks. Presently he came back to me, his eyes kindling, his head held high. I saw then, for the first time, a likeness to his mother when she was a girl.

'Basil,' I said eagerly, 'you have the Sefton mouth. You remind me of your mother and grandfather !'

He looked excessively pleased at that.

'I am trying to realise it all,' he said simply ; 'yesterday I was no one ; I did not even know my own name ; I was indebted to charity for a roof ; to-day'—here his eyes flashed ; he looked wonderfully handsome—'to-day I am Basil Lyndhurst, master of Brookfield Hall ; the descendant of a hundred brave ancestors ; and the best of it is,' his voice changing as he spoke, 'that it will all come to my little chap—to Reggie !'

CHAPTER XXVI

LIZETTE DUPONT

‘Let our old acquaintance be renewed.’—*Second Part of Henry IV.*

‘She’s a good creature.’—*Merry Wives of Windsor.*

IT was nearly one o’clock when we parted at the gate of the cemetery, for Basil had excused himself from accompanying me back to La Maissonnette. He would put me into a passing fiacre, he said; but there were many things that would detain him at St. Genette. It was absolutely necessary for him to seek an interview with Père Lefevre. He wished to see an entry of his baptism at St. Sulpice. Inquiries must also be set on foot for the relatives of Lizette Dupont; he must take counsel with Père Lefevre on the matter. All this was said in a quick, decisive voice. Basil was bringing his clear, masculine intellect to bear on the subject. I felt he would lose no time and spare no pains in unravelling every possible clue. To my surprise, he begged me to defer my letter to Virginia until the next day.

‘It will be a long letter; it will take you hours to write it,’ he continued as I remonstrated with him. ‘You are far too tired for such a task, and I am sure Miss Leigh will agree with me. You must go home and rest, that you may be ready to talk to me this evening;’ but I objected to this on the score of selfishness.

‘You selfish!’ he returned in a tone of infinite scorn; but he relented at my pleading face. ‘Well, if you must write, let it be a brief note of preparation; it will be better so. Say you have news—important news; that you know exactly where Basil is to be found; that he is well, and that you will write more fully by the next mail. Will you promise me to do this, Aunt Catherine?’ and he would not let me leave him until I had promised.

How strange it was to submit to that strong young will ! Since my father's death no one had contested mine, and yet it was sweet to me to give way. 'There is some one to take care of us now,' I thought, as I drove away and left him standing in the middle of the road. He had pulled off his gray cap, and the sunshine shone on his uncovered head. How strong he looked—so full of life and energy, with such free grace and ease in every movement—a son of whom any mother could be proud ! And as I thought of Virginia, I could not see him for the mist before my eyes.

The midday meal was over when I arrived,—I had left orders that things should go on as usual,—but Jeanne brought me a dainty little dinner, and waited on me. Olga was with Reggie in the little grove. I could see the red umbrella gleaming through the trees. As soon as I had refreshed myself, and written a few lines to Virginia, I joined them, after giving orders that our coffee should be served there. I was too much excited to sleep, and an easy-chair in the shade would be delicious. Reggie was lying in the hammock, and looked far more like his old self, in spite of the loss of his hair. I thought he was prettier than ever. His delicacy gave him an ethereal look, and his eyes were larger and brighter. He had his two kittens hugged tightly in his arms. I thought I never saw a sweeter picture.

Olga was reading. She put down her book to talk to me. I told her a little about our morning's conversation, but it was not possible to say much before Reggie, and after a time we changed the subject. Presently she leant towards me and whispered : 'Do you know, Reggie has been talking about his mother to-day quite of his own accord. When I asked him if he wanted to go back to her, he shook his head most decidedly.

"Reggie will stop here with father and my Dear," he said. "Mother is always too tired to put Reggie to bed, so Becky comes ;" and then he went on about Uncle George, but I could not understand him in the least. "If Reggie goes home, my Dear must come too," he finished. Was it not pretty of him to say that ?

'Olga, I do believe you love that child more than you love Girlie or Wilfred.'

'I cannot help it,' she returned quickly. 'Is it wrong, Aunt Catherine ? one is not responsible for these things. I daresay Mr. Fleming felt the same for that little child he found in the garret. I think Reggie and I will always love each other, if it were only for the memory of the sweet days we have passed together.'

She spoke in a somewhat troubled tone. Olga certainly looked a little pale and subdued this afternoon; perhaps the heat oppressed her; she had lost her old vivacity; but the next minute she made an effort to recover herself.

'Oh, do you know there is something I have not told you? I had a letter from Jem this morning, such a long delightful letter, and he says that next week he will be coming home, and he wants to know if there will be any chance of seeing me.'

'That depends on Basil. Reggie is well enough to travel now. Next week?—oh yes! Virginia will be expecting us before that.'

'Will it be so soon over—our happy visit?' And Olga looked wistful, almost sad. 'It will be like a dream when we look back on it—the bay, and the yellow sands, and Sefton Point, and this dear old house, and the pavilion. Shall you care to see Jem again, Aunt Catherine? But he is nothing now; it is only Mr. Basil.'

She spoke with the smile still on her lips. Olga had such a lovely smile, but only I who knew her could recognise the sadness underneath it.

'Yes, it is Basil who is our own boy; but you will still be a part of my life—you and Jem. Even Basil will not come between us. Surely you believe this, Olga?'

'Oh yes,' she returned, kissing me hastily. 'Dear Aunt Catherine, do you think I would have it otherwise? All these years you have been so patient and so lonely, and now you have Mr. Basil and Reggie; for Reggie is your own, too. How glad Jem will be! but you must expect him to be surprised; and it will be nice, too, for me when I come up to the Hall, for there will be Reggie to play with, and sometimes for a great treat his grandmother will let me carry him off to Fircroft, and we will show him the Surprise; and perhaps Hugh will let him have a little garden of his own, and I shall sit and watch him with the other children, and Kitty will be as fond of him as possible.'

We had both forgotten Reggie's mother. What would Olga say when she knew the sort of woman Basil would bring to the Hall as its mistress? Would not her pure nature be shocked by such a contrast? would not even Basil sink in her estimation when she had seen his wife? I was about to answer her, when Jeanne appeared with the coffee; and the next moment Basil's tall figure blocked up the doorway. Reggie caught sight of him and shouted his name with all his feeble force; then he raised himself up in the hammock and stretched out his arms. It was hardly a wonder that Basil snatched him up and kissed him before

he had a word for us. 'Has Reggie wanted father so badly?' he asked with that wonderful gentleness he always showed to his boy.

'Reggie always wants father,' returned the little fellow in his quaint way—'father and my Dear.'

I saw Basil look hastily across at Olga; but she was busying herself with the coffee-cups and did not seem to see him. I wondered if he noticed her paleness. She had put on her white gown to please me. I always grumbled if Olga did not wear white in the summer; nothing suited her so well. This afternoon she had fastened a spray of jasmine at her throat; she looked so young, so child-like and simple, that it did one good to see her. I wondered why Basil suddenly knit his brows together as though something pained him; then he put Reggie back in the hammock again and turned to me.

'Aunt Catherine, I have seen the entry of my baptism at St. Sulpice. Père Lefevre—what an old brick he is!—went with me. There it was—Basil Theodore Lyndhurst. The priest who baptized me is dead now; his name was Père Delasse.'

'I am so glad you have seen it for yourself.'

'Glad that I am a Roman Catholic?' with an amused glance at me. 'You will be sorry to hear, then, that I was rebaptized at Leeds; but I have found out more than that. Miss Leigh, do you think Aunt Catherine is too tired to drive with me again to St. Croix! it is a beautiful evening, and I have a fiacre at the door, and when we have finished our coffee——'

'Oh, Basil, do you mean——'

'That we have found Lizette Dupont? That is exactly what I do mean. That old trump—I beg his pardon—Père Lefevre had discovered her; she is still alive, you see, and as brisk and sensible at seventy-five as she was at fifty; she told his reverence that she was not much over fifty when she became my *bonne*.'

'Have you seen her, Basil?'

'No,' he replied, laughing. 'I could not accomplish everything in three hours and a half. I was more than two hours with Monsieur Lefevre, and he gave me something to eat; then we went to St. Sulpice and spent another hour, and here I am.'

'And you want me to go with you?'

'Yes; but not until you have finished your coffee; there is no hurry; it is only five now. Miss Leigh, I am afraid you will owe me a grudge for carrying off Aunt Catherine; but you can understand how anxious I am to establish my own identity.'

'Yes,' she said gently, 'I can understand that, Mr. Basil, and I will go and fetch Aunt Catherine's bonnet and her lace shawl—for

there is no need for her to fatigue herself unnecessarily ; and then I will put Reggie to bed, for I can see he is growing tired.'

She moved away as she spoke, and I could see Basil was watching her closely ; when she had disappeared into the house, he said :

'Aunt Catherine, you have known Miss Leigh for years—since she was a little girl ; does she ever think of herself at all?' and without waiting for my answer he continued : 'But I am going to carry Reggie in myself, for he is growing quite heavy. Do you think you can sit on my shoulder again, old fellow?' and as Reggie screamed with delight at the idea, he was carried off in the old fashion.

Basil had secured a pair of fresh horses, and in a very short time we were rattling down the steep stony roads that led to St. Sulpice. By and by we had to descend, and enter a sort of blind alley. The houses looked poor and squalid ; but one at the end had a more respectable appearance. The step before the door had been freshly scoured ; some plants blocked up the little window. A young woman with a baby in her arms was talking volubly to a man in a blue blouse. Basil walked up to her with his cap in his hand.

'Madame, is it here that Lizette Dupont lives?'

Oui, vraiment ; monsieur was perfectly correct. She was Lizette Dupont's grand-daughter, and this was Gustave, her husband. Le bon père had already enlightened them ; they were to expect une dame Anglaise, who had les affaires with the grand'mère ; would madame and monsieur enter? The place was dark ; but they would become accustomed to the obscurity. And she was discoursing still volubly when a shrill voice from within was heard chiding her for her delay.

'Tiens ! thou hast been a chatterbox from thy birth, Marie ! Let madame enter ;' and then Marie withdrew her substantial figure from the doorway.

'Be not cross, little mother,' she said tranquilly ; 'the day is long enough and to spare. Entrez, madame !' and I advanced cautiously into the close, dark room.

When my eyes became used to the dim light I could see Lizette Dupont more distinctly ; she was sitting knitting by the stove. She was a tiny woman, with a brown, puckered face and bead-like black eyes that looked sharply at us. She wore a close cap, rather like her great-grandchild's, and a pair of silver earrings dangled against her wrinkled neck.

She greeted us with shrill welcomes, and begged to know our errand. Le bon père had been mysterious. 'Une dame Anglaise

wishes to question you, my daughter ; there are *les affaires*.' That was all that had been said ; and then he had asked her many questions about her past life.

I commenced cautiously ; but directly Basil's name had crossed my lips she interrupted me with a loud exclamation :

Le petit ange ! le pauvre cher enfant ! was it of him madame would speak ? But, truly, *le bon Dieu* was wonderful in His ways ! It might be her prayers to our blessed Lady had touched her Son's sacred heart. She had prayed, she had wept, that she might have news of the little one before she died.

She was so excited that I hardly knew how to proceed ; but Basil came to my assistance. He took her shrivelled hand, and said gently :

'That was a long time ago, Lizette. Should you know me now ?'

'You, monsieur, you !' and the little beady-black eyes seemed to look him through and through. 'Holy Virgin ! could this grand-looking monsieur, so much stronger and bigger than her Pierre—could he be her baby, her nursling, her *petit Basil* ?'

'Yes, truly, *ma bonne*—I am Basil Lyndhurst.'

'Lyndhurst ! oh, the name !' she screamed, and the skinny arms were flung round his neck, and, before he could remonstrate, she had kissed him on either cheek.

He bore it very well, however ; indeed, he told me afterwards that those kisses of his old nurse had touched him greatly.

'She is only a peasant ; but once she was the only friend I had. Can I ever forget that ?'

The poor old creature was so much overcome that it was some time before we could induce her to compose herself. The tears rolled down her wrinkled face, and she kept ejaculating, in a sort of ecstasy, '*Le cher petit ! le joli ange !*' stroking Basil's hand all the time.

He coaxed her at last to recount her little story. She wandered a good deal at first, and we found it difficult to follow her meaning, though she spoke very tolerable French. She would clench her fist whenever she mentioned Paul Lyndhurst's name—'*cet homme infâme !*' as she called him—but we understood her better after a little.

'I adored my mistress,' she said presently ; 'she was so gentle and so handsome, and until that bad man broke her heart and drove her away she lived only for her child.'

'Hush, Lizette ; you are speaking of Basil's father.'

But Basil gave me a reproving glance.

'Do not interrupt her, Aunt Catherine ; it is better to hear the

truth. It is not possible for me to respect my father's memory ; I have told you already that Mr. Fleming is the only father I have ever known.'

'Fleming! Tiens, mon enfant! that was the name of the English priest who carried thee away! Holy Mother! how it all comes back to me! and yet it was nearly four-and-twenty years ago.'

We exchanged looks of mutual satisfaction, and she rambled on:

'My mistress was so devoted to the child that she could not bear him out of her sight. "He is my only consolation," she would say. "Look at him, Lizette!" she would cry; "is he not a wonderful baby? and so intelligent! See, he is holding my finger now!" and so on; for she would talk of him for hours. It was a happy day for me when Père Delasse baptized him in our beautiful church. We carried him there secretly, for fear of monsieur. The English priest was absent, and madame was in great perplexity what to do.

"My child must be baptized," she said. "If I cannot find a Protestant clergyman, I will take him to St. Sulpice. There is no time to be lost; Paul will carry us off in a day or two."

'Seest thou, mon enfant, how the blessed Virgin heard my prayers?' and her shrill voice softened into tenderness.

'Alas! the very day after our little one received the grace of baptism there was the terrible scene with monsieur, and madame fled from the house. We waited up for her all night; monsieur's rage was awful. When she did not come back, and a week had passed, he carried us off. I was afraid to go, to trust myself with cet homme terrible; but there was the little one, so I went.

'It was a miserable life we led, wandering from town to town wherever there were picture-galleries; for monsieur cared for nothing but his pictures and the drink.

'He fell ill at last, and they removed him to a hospital. He was raving mad, they told me. What a position! picture it for thyself, mon cher. No money—hardly a sou to buy us bread; but the blessed saints were not deaf to Lizette's prayer. The woman of the house was a good Christian; she had children of her own; she pitied us.

"There is the garret," she said; "it will shelter thee and the child. When meal-time comes I will spare thee some onion broth and some bread. Do not lose faith. When monsieur is well, he will repay me."

'Oh, she was a good creature, this Madame Gotier!

'We lived like this for weeks; le petit grew and thrived.

When people saw him in the public walks, they said he was as beautiful as an angel. Many came up and spoke to him, and pressed bon-bons and cakes on him. Then he would run to me and show me his treasures.

"Regarde-tu, ma bonne, these bon-bons Basil has got!"

"Then they would look at me curiously.

"He is poorly dressed; but that peasant is not his mother," they would say.

"One day the English priest came up and spoke to him, and the next day to that; and afterwards le petit would clap his hands at the sight of him. He called him the kind Englishman.

"One wet day we were in our garret. Le petit had no toys, and he was playing with a bit of wood and some rags. I was in bad spirits. Madame Gotier had been up, and told me that her husband had been grumbling at her.

"We have not enough for our own children, and thou art feeding strangers," he had said.

"And then she caught up the child and cried, and we both wept together.

"Lizette, thou must speak to the Maire," she said presently. "I dare not anger Henri; he is, as thou knowest, of a violent temper."

"I prayed to our Mother of Sorrows with all my heart when she had left me. Le petit seemed uneasy at my tears.

"Why dost thou weep, ma bonne?" he asked, stroking my face; "they will give us bread to-day."

"And to-morrow, mon enfant?"

"To-morrow—we shall see;" and he marched off with a wise look.

"What did le pauvre petit know of to-morrow? Alas! my tears could not cease. Must I take the child in my arms, and beg my way back to St. Croix? Should we not both expire with fatigue and famine?

"Mon enfant! my faith had failed; and at that moment relief was at hand. There was a knock at the door, and the English priest came in. Le petit shouted at the sight of him.

"Hast thou brought Basil some pain-d'épice, monsieur?" he cried; and when the Englishman took him in his arms, he patted his face with his little hands.

"Are you in trouble, my good woman?" he asked presently, sitting down beside me, while the child opened his box of bon-bons; and then it all came out—what Madame Gotier had told me, and how her husband had refused us shelter.

“I will settle all that,” he said quietly. “Will you come with me, Basil? I will bring you back to your nurse presently;” and actually *le petit* left his *bon-bons* at once.

“May I take some *pain-d'épice* to Tonton and Marie?” he asked.

‘Ah! it was like the dear angel, to share with others.

‘From that day all went well. Monsieur Fleming—he told me that was his name—came to us every day. Sometimes he took us out with him. Henri ceased to grumble, for rent was paid for the garret, and Madame Gotier served our meals regularly. It was not always onion soup now, but sometimes roast meat and vegetables; and plenty of milk and white bread for breakfast and supper.

“Monsieur pays for everything,” Madame Gotier told me one evening. “Henri is in an excellent temper; everything is as it should be.”

‘I was happy then; I think I loved *le petit* more than my own children; I wanted those days to go on for ever; too soon they came to an end!

‘One day I was summoned to the hospital. Monsieur Lyndhurst informed me abruptly that he had no further need of my services. My wages would be paid, and I might go to my own people. He had made other arrangements for Basil. The English clergyman would take him to England—this was all he told me. Was it a wonder that I believed in my own heart that he was taking him to his mother?

‘I was heart-broken; but it was for the child’s good. I was only an ignorant peasant, who could neither read nor write; and he was like a young prince for beauty. I let him go; I think I did not speak; something seemed to choke the words back. *Le petit* kissed me, and went off gaily, chattering to his new friend.

‘As for me,’ finished Lizette sadly, ‘I went to live with Pierre, until he married again, and then Julie’s daughter took me in. There were little ones in both houses; but they were not *le petit*. For years I never ceased to regret him; but I became comforted at last.’

‘Lizette,’ I interrupted in a tremulous voice that I strove in vain to steady, ‘you have not described this English clergyman who took Basil away.’

‘I am not good at description, madame,’ she returned simply. ‘Monsieur was young, but he looked worn and sad; some one told me he had had an illness. He was not handsome—not like Monsieur Lyndhurst, who had *la beauté de Diable*—but his face

inspired one with confidence. He had gray eyes, full of gentleness, and when he smiled it seemed to lift the weight off one's heart. For the rest, his face was smooth like a boy's, and his hair was a reddish brown; he used to rumple it when he grew excited in his talk, and he would get up from his chair and walk up and down the room, talking all the time.'

'I never could break him off the habit,' observed Basil, laughing; 'and that trick of running his fingers through his hair when he was perplexed—how well I remember it! Aunt Catherine, is it this close room that makes you look so pale? I shall be glad to get out in the air myself.'

'Let us go,' I returned quickly.

Oh, how true it all was! I felt as Lizette talked as though Robert Fleming were standing beside me; that infinitely sweet smile, those deep-set gray eyes—had I ever forgotten them?

'Must thou go, mon enfant?' exclaimed Lizette querulously. 'I have found thee only to see thee vanish again.'

'I will come again before we leave St. Croix,' he replied soothingly. 'If I can, I will bring my boy Reggie; he will remind you of the little Basil. I will tell you about him another time, but I must go now.'

He pressed some money into her hand, and shook it heartily. Marie was still talking to her husband; she eyed us curiously as we passed. The fiacre was waiting at the end of the alley, and we were soon rattling through the stony streets. Basil appeared lost in thought for some time; then he roused himself.

'Aunt Catherine,' he said quietly, 'to-morrow I shall write to Mr. Fleming and tell him everything, and you must write to my mother.'

'Would it not be better to speak to him, Basil?—there is so much to explain.'

'Of course I must speak to him. If I were in England, I would go to him at once, Aunt Catherine,' looking at me wistfully. 'Do you not think we ought to go as soon as possible?'

'You are right. When she receives my letter—the letter I am to write to-morrow—your mother will count the hours until she sees you. She will not sleep or rest until she has looked upon her son's face.'

'In that case we ought to start at once. It is Friday—we might take the Monday boat. Is not this your opinion?'

'I have not thought about it; I will tell you to-morrow,' I replied faintly.

I could decide nothing more that night. Basil was very quick. He saw at once that I was exhausted, and said no more; but

when I looked at him I could see by his intent face that he was making his plans. Of course he would have his way, and, after all, it was a comfort not to decide for one's self. 'I shall leave everything to Basil,' was my last thought before I fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER XXVII

GOOD-BYE TO LA MAISONNETTE

'I never looked a last adieu
To things familiar, but my heart
Shrank with a feeling, almost pain,
Even from their lifelessness to part.'
MISS BOWLES.

AFTER all, Basil had his way, and we arranged to start by the Monday boat. Olga heard our decision very quietly. When I said a word or two of regret about her holiday being over, she stopped me at once.

'That has nothing to do with you and Mr. Basil,' she said quickly. 'Your business is finished; it is right for you to go home. We have been here seven weeks—seven weeks—and I think they have been the happiest of my life'—with a certain wistful emphasis on the words.

'But you are sorry that our visit is over, Olga?' I persisted.

'One is always sorry when a holiday is over, but that is not the right way of looking at it. Your anxiety is over, and you are going to show Mr. Basil his beautiful home, and I shall be near you, and you will tell me about everything, and Jem and I will be as happy as possible.' But, for all that, there were tears in her eyes when she kissed me. 'Dear Aunt Catherine, it has been so nice having you to myself. I shall never forget these days at La Maissonnette—never——'

Here she broke off suddenly, as Basil came into the room, and went out into the garden to join Reggie. Basil looked after her rather anxiously.

'Has she been crying?' he asked abruptly. 'Is she sorry to leave here? I do not wish to be selfish, Aunt Catherine, and if you think Miss Leigh——'

'Olga is quite ready to go,' I returned; 'she perfectly approves

of our decision. As for breaking our journey and staying at an hotel for the night, she approves of that, too. She thinks, with me, that Reggie will be too tired if we go on, and that it will be far better for you to see your home in daylight.'

'I was not thinking of myself when I proposed it,' he replied, with a shade of annoyance in his tone. Basil had been slightly irritable all the morning; the excitement and strain of the last few days were telling upon him. 'I thought a few hours' rest would be good for you and Reggie, and we should give my mother a little time to recover herself. If you or Miss Leigh think otherwise, I need not engage the rooms.'

'It is far better to do as you have arranged, Basil, my dear. It is such pleasure to have some one to take care of us. I have always had to be the business-man of the family, but I shall gladly abdicate in your favour;' but to my surprise he made no response to this little speech.

He took up some telegrams and read them, and then he said in a low voice:

'Miss Leigh does not look herself. I want you to tell her from me that if she wishes it Reggie shall be with her as much as he is now. I am too grateful to her not to spare him whenever she wants him. It shall be the same at Brookfield as it is here. Will you tell her this, Aunt Catherine?'

'Certainly I will if you wish it, Basil.'

His manner gave me a little uneasiness; he seemed far from happy, as though Olga's sadness had infected him; but after a few minutes he conquered his unaccountable depression, and showed me the letter he had written to Mr. Fleming.

'I have sent a telegram, too,' he said presently; but I was so absorbed with the contents of the letter that I forgot to ask him, then or afterwards, what he had said in his telegram. There was so much to arrange that day—letters to write and bills to pay, and all sorts of commissions to give Basil when he went to the town.

He did not come back until Reggie was asleep and Olga had joined me in the salon. He found us sitting at the open window, looking out on the barn and the moonlit court.

'It is such a delicious evening!' he said coaxingly; 'would not you and Miss Leigh like a stroll on the common before supper? You have not been out of the house all day, Aunt Catherine!'

'But you must be so tired, Basil.'

'Tired!' with a contemptuous laugh; 'why, I could walk ten more miles with ease. Miss Leigh, I hope you will join us. Monsieur Perrot has been prophesying rain to-morrow; so perhaps it may be our last walk together at St. Croix.'

'Very well,' she replied gently, rising at once from her seat, and we followed Basil into the lane.

We strolled past the little grove and down the common, towards Sefton Point; but he would not let us pause there, so we went down the steep path, by the bathing-house, to the sands below. Just as we were passing it Basil addressed Olga for the first time:

'Do you remember that morning when you called to us to take shelter from the rain? It was one of the many kindnesses for which I have to thank you—one of the things I shall never forget. I hope you do not think I am ungrateful if I say little about them.'

'I think it is your nature to be grateful, Mr. Basil,' she answered quietly; 'but you have nothing for which to thank me. I have always pleased myself in what I have done. It is so pleasant to serve one's friends.'

'We are friends, then, Miss Leigh?'

I thought it rather odd of Basil to make this speech when Olga had shown him such real friendship; but she answered him quite naturally:

'Oh yes; I hope so. I should be very sorry to believe otherwise.'

'And I, too;' but he spoke so much under his breath that I doubted if she heard him. Then he turned to me and asked me to take his arm. I was walking so slowly that he was sure I was tired. He spoke in his old affectionate way. Perhaps he already knew how I loved to lean on that strong young arm.

We stood for a long time looking at the silvery waves as they shimmered and sparkled in the moonlight. We were all very silent at first until Olga began to talk in her gentle, rapid way.

'I shall always like this bay; but I think I prefer the wide open sea at St. Genette, where the big waves roll in and break into white surf on the shore. It is more real, somehow. Do you know what I mean?' half turning to Basil as though she were addressing him.

'I think I can guess,' he returned; 'there is more freedom. It gives one a greater sense of power. One can imagine what the sea looks like hundreds of miles away; but, all the same, I should have thought this quiet, peaceful bay would have suited your taste better.'

'You think I am tame in my ideas,' she replied, with a touch of impatience. 'You are wrong; you do not know me. This peace, this tranquillity, might become a little monotonous in time; it is more suited for age than youth. I am not quite so prim and quiet as you think. I am afraid I like change—variety, even

storms; yes, even storms,' with a little laugh; 'it is like life. Things are for ever changing in life—hopes and fears, joys, disappointments, miseries, all come tumbling to our feet like the big waves at St. Genette.'

'I think there are no miseries in store for you,' he answered quickly. 'If I were a prophet, I should prophesy smooth things of your future. After all, your life will be like this bay—there will be no billows mountain high to engulf your little bark.'

'There are storms even in this bay,' she replied, smiling. 'People have been drowned—Jeanne told me so. Your smooth things may be deceitful. I do not think you are a true prophet. Do you know, when I was a child I wanted to be a martyr;' and actually she related to him the childish incident of the scorched finger. She told it so prettily, too, with a pathetic rendering that took away all desire to laugh.

I do not know what Basil thought of it, but he said:

'Poor little thing! Poor innocent little child!' half to himself.

'So you see I shall never make a martyr.'

'Why not?' he returned. 'Because you have failed once? Do you think perfection is to be achieved in one attempt? You must ask Aunt Catherine's opinion—it is not for me to talk to you.'

'But I wish you to talk to me,' she replied playfully.

'I cannot, Miss Leigh. I have made too many mistakes in my own life to set people right with theirs. How can you ask a man who has trampled on his own ideals, and who has squandered all his priceless treasures in return for a passing gratification, to preach faith to such an one as you? Mr. Fleming is your sort; he would talk to you for hours.'

'Mr. Basil,' she said quickly, 'I thought you said just now that we were friends. Have you forgotten that already?'

'No; certainly not,' looking at her in some surprise.

'Well, then, I do not like my friends to paint themselves in such black colours; it is not kind to Aunt Catherine, or to yourself. What does it matter if you have made mistakes, except that you must bear the consequences as patiently as you can? So many people make mistakes, and are sorry, and then do better, and——'

'But there is one mistake that can never be rectified,' he answered in a low voice.

I knew at once that he was thinking of his wife, but I could not tell if Olga understood him; it was not possible for either of them to speak quite plainly.

'If it cannot be rectified, you must just make the best of it,' she answered. 'I suppose if we sow tares of our own free will we cannot expect corn to grow up. Is that not true?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' he replied gloomily; but she would not let him finish in that tone.

'You must not speak so, as though everything would not come right some day. Life is not for ever. You will not take your mistakes with you up above. Perhaps—who knows?—they may be set right here.'

'Never—never!' between his clenched teeth.

'Never mind,' she returned cheerfully; 'then you must just put up with them as they are. It will not be so hard when you are in your beautiful home, and you have your mother and Aunt Catherine and Reggie. You will have so much to do; there will be your tenants, and perhaps you may enter Parliament; and when you are doing good with all your might and helping other people to be good too, you will not find much time for thinking of past mistakes. Am I not right, Aunt Catherine?'

'Yes, my darling; Basil will find this out for himself one day.'

'What am I to say to you two good women?' returned Basil with suppressed emotion. 'I think I had better say nothing for fear I should make an ass of myself; but you shall see—you shall see—if I am not a better man from this day.'

'It will all come right,' she said cheerfully; and then she walked a little farther to the edge of the sea, and we heard her singing the verse of a hymn softly to herself:

'Brief life is here our portion;
Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
The life that knows no ending,
The tearless life, is there.'

Basil made no remark, and we walked on. Once we looked back; Olga was still standing motionless in the same position. The moonlight shone on her white dress and on her uplifted face. She had thrown a light woollen scarf over her head. In the strange silvery light she looked like some beautiful picture.

'Do you know of what she reminds me now, Basil?'

'No,' he answered rather shortly.

'Of some picture I have seen of Christiana about to cross the river. The drapery looks just the same, and there is the water.'

'I thought Christiana was an old woman,' he answered curtly.

'To my mind, Miss Leigh rather resembles Mercy or Phœbe.'

Evidently my fancy did not please him, for he called to her somewhat peremptorily:

'It is getting late, Miss Leigh, and Aunt Catherine is very tired;' and she ran towards us at once.

'I suppose I must not ask what you were thinking about just now?' remarked Basil, as she joined us.

'I was only saying good-bye to it all,' she returned, looking at him a little sadly. 'It has been such a lovely time, and this is such a dear place!' and then she came round to my side and took my arm, and we went slowly up by the washing-pool, and under the dark overhanging trees; and it seemed to me that neither of them spoke again until we reached home, and then Basil said he had a headache, and did not want his supper.

Olga and I went to church the next morning, while Basil stopped with Reggie; and in the evening Olga took his place. We spent the afternoon in the garden, and Basil made me come with him and say good-bye to the pavilion; he did not ask Olga to come too.

'It is only for you and me,' he whispered. 'Do you think I shall ever forget that night, Aunt Catherine, when I was sick with famine and could not touch food; and yet I could take it from your hand like a child.'

We went to church together after that, leaving Olga with Reggie. Basil had been a little quiet and subdued all day, but he became like his old self directly he found himself alone with me. In the course of our walk he spoke a great deal of his mother and Aline.

'I want you to tell me what I am to do,' he said presently. 'I have been lying awake for hours thinking of the future. I know what my duty is to Aline, and yet how am I to do it without causing misery to you and my mother? I want you to advise me and help me.'

'My dear,' I replied after a moment's hesitation, 'I am old-fashioned, and have old-fashioned notions.'

'You mean,' he returned quickly, for he always seemed to understand the slightest hint, 'that I must act up to the spirit as well as to the letter of my marriage vows—for better for worse—and it has been for worse all along.' A bitter sigh escaped him, and then he went on: 'I have tried to be a good husband to her—indeed I have tried; but it is she who has failed in her wifely duty. Aunt Catherine, I should never have left her as I have if she had said a word to keep me; her sullenness has driven me away. I believe in my heart that she is happier without me; last night I was thinking that perhaps it would be better for her to stay with George.'

'Basil, my dear boy, would that be right?'

'I think it would be the lesser of two evils. If Aline be at the Hall, she will make your and my mother's life wretched ; she is safer with George ; in some way I think I irritate her. I could make her an allowance, and Reggie and I could go and see her sometimes!'

I was silent. It would be easier so ; our poor boy would in some degree recover his lost freedom. But again I asked myself, Would it be right ? Could any one absolve him of the responsibility he had taken on himself?—'Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder.' As I thought of those awful words I shuddered.

Basil was watching my face as though to gain the clue to my thoughts. I repeated the words aloud ; he seemed to shiver as he heard them.

'Don't, Aunt Catherine!'

'My dear, she is your wife ; you are responsible in God's sight for that poor girl ; she is the mother of your boy—of your little lost angel. In spite of her grievous infirmities, she has been a true wife to you.'

He flushed up at that.

'She has never cared for any other man,' he said proudly.

'In her own way she loves you. No, do not shake your head. I have gathered this from your own words. You have no right to refuse her the shelter of your home, unless she tells you that she wishes to remain with her brother.'

'She will never tell me that.'

'Are you sure of that, Basil?'

'Quite sure. You do not know Aline ; she is proud, too, in her way ; she always wanted to marry a gentleman—to live above her station ; she likes soft, luxurious living—handsome clothes—dainty food ; she would like to drive in her carriage. George cannot gratify her tastes ; I have only to say "Come," and she will leave him at once.'

'And yet you think she will be happier with him?'

'After a time—yes ; these things will only satisfy her until they have lost their novelty. She has got the demon of unrest within her ; neither I nor any living man can make Aline happy. I am telling you the whole truth ; when she comes to the Hall, there will be misery in store for us all.'

'It will not be so bad as you think, Basil,' I returned, anxious to soothe him. 'In a small house it might be so ; but when you see the wing we call the Dower House, you will take a more cheerful view of things. There are two large sitting-rooms ; there will be no necessity for us even to have our meals together. Aline need never see us unless she likes.'

'Aunt Catherine,' he remonstrated, 'is it to me you are saying this? Do you think I am so happy that I shall not need you every day of my life? Will there be any one dearer to me or more honoured than you?'

'Basil—your mother!'

'I do not know my mother,' impatiently; 'she is not my friend as you have been. How do I know how things will be between us? It is you to whom I shall turn for comfort when Aline'—and then he stopped, and went on bitterly—'yes, I will ask her to come; I will not shirk my duty. Will that content you?'

'Yes,' I replied, pressing his arm. 'I ask nothing but to see you do your duty. Basil, when you go and fetch your wife I will go too.'

'You!' he exclaimed, with a start; and then he said gratefully, 'But that is so like your goodness!'

'My dear, what nonsense! You are one of us now. Your burdens are ours. Oh, I know well what Virginia will say when she hears your story! She has such a good heart. She will say, "Bring your wife to me, Basil, and let me try to be a mother to her;" and nothing will exceed her gentleness. Aline will not be able to resist her when she sees herself surrounded by all this kindness. She will not be sullen any longer.'

I think he was too much touched to answer, and we walked on in silence. It was sweet to me to hear the assurances of his affection, and yet in my heart I felt as though I were robbing Virginia. She had still to win him.

Olga was singing to herself in the dusk when we returned; we could hear the clear, sweet notes through the open window. Basil made me stand in the courtyard for a long time listening to them.

'She will not sing like that unless she believes herself alone,' he said by way of explanation; and, indeed, I had never heard her sing so well.

The rest of the evening passed very peacefully. After supper, we sat round the window—still in the dark—and talked; at least, Basil talked. Olga was rather quiet. He wanted to hear about all the people on the estate; the names and private history of the tenants—his curiosity on the subject was insatiable.

'I mean to be interested about everybody and everything,' he finished, when I declined to enlighten him any more.

I think we were all a little tired that night; but Olga came into my room to look at Reggie in his sleep.

'It is for the last time,' she said softly, as she kissed his closed eyelids. 'He belongs to you now, Aunt Catherine.'

I had given her Basil's message, and I reminded her of this, but she only shook her head.

'Everything will be different,' she returned rather sadly. 'Reggie will have his mother and his grandmother and you; he will not need me then. Mr. Basil is very kind; but he does not understand that things must be different;' and then she went away without looking at him again.

I thought of Reggie's baby-words, 'I shall always want father and my Dear;' and I could not help thinking that Olga might be wrong.

The next morning Basil took Reggie down to St. Genette to see Lizette, while Olga and I completed our packing. They drove there and back, so as to save the child any fatigue. They both looked wonderfully bright on their return.

'Lizette was quite bewildered at first,' Basil said, laughing; 'she took Reggie for me. We could not make her understand for a long time. Reggie was quite alarmed. "Reggie is Reggie!" he kept saying; so at last she was convinced. "He is thy image, mon cher!" she said presently. "I am growing old; my eyes are dim. I thought surely it was mon petit." Ah, well, we have left her happy, poor old soul! so it is a good morning's work, after all.'

We sat in the little grove all the afternoon, and Jeanne served us our coffee there. I missed Olga after a time, and Basil said he would go in search of her. He seemed to know instinctively where she was to be found.

It was growing late, so I dressed Reggie and myself. The fiacre was at the door, and Jules and Jeanne were bringing out the luggage. Rollo was with his mistress. I felt a little anxious at Olga's delay, and went out in the lane to look for her. She and Basil were just coming down the field-path.

'There is Aunt Catherine,' I heard her say; and they quickened their steps.

I thought Olga seemed a little excited. She slipped her hand in my arm as I stood waiting for the luggage to be strapped on the fiacre. The sun was just setting; a sort of glorified stillness seemed to pervade the scene. How peaceful it all looked—the old house, with its brown shutters, its open windows; the courtyard, with its sycamore; the steep, shady lane; the cornfields! There were the chickens scratching in the dust as usual; the gray and white kittens frisking on the doorway; Jeanne clattering to the gate with one package after another.

Basil assisted us into the fiacre in silence, and then followed us and took Reggie on his knee.

'Good-bye to La Maisonnette !' exclaimed Olga, as Jules cracked his whip. Her voice was so sad that we both looked at her. Were there tears in her eyes, or was it only the sunlight? 'Good-bye to La Maisonnette, and the dear, beautiful days that have been so happy !'

CHAPTER XXVIII

'AULD LANG SYNE'

'But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.'

Julius Cæsar.

'He has my heart yet, and shall have my prayers
While I shall have my life.'

Henry VIII.

WE had a calm passage, and the September night was so warm and pleasant that we remained late on deck. Olga seemed to enjoy pacing up and down in the starlight. She yielded reluctantly to my proposition at last to seek our berths, and secure two or three hours' sleep; but, after all, the suggestion was a wise one, as it enabled us to join Basil at breakfast feeling tolerably refreshed.

I think we all found the journey from Southampton a little irksome. Reggie, who was still weak from his recent illness, curled himself up on Olga's lap, and was soon fast asleep. Every half-hour Basil begged to relieve her, but she always refused.

'Do let me keep him,' she pleaded. 'He is so light that I can hardly feel his weight.'

But, for all that, she looked a little weary when we arrived at Waterloo.

Basil had secured rooms for us at the Grosvenor. It was quite early in the afternoon as we drove up to our hotel; but Reggie was already asking to be put to bed, so we felt we had done wisely to break the journey. It was arranged that he was to sleep with Olga that night; she had begged it as a favour. We were taken at once to our rooms; and when Reggie had had

his tea and was comfortably tucked up in bed, we left him under the charge of the chamber-maid, and went down to our sitting-room.

Dinner was on the table, and as soon as we had finished we drew our chairs round the open window and looked down on the animated scene below. A stream of vehicles passed every moment; the foot-passengers were jostling each other on the pavement; eager faces; gay dresses, children's voices—noise, movement everywhere. Olga gazed down upon it all with a grave, abstracted face. Perhaps at that moment her thoughts were far away. Most likely she was recalling a different scene—a steep, shady lane, with fern-covered banks, the blue water of the bay shining in the sunlight; a certain brown gate with a sycamore over it. Near us a bell was ringing for the evening service; a woman was singing in the square. We could hear her voice—a little cracked, but not without a rude sort of melody—‘In the gloaming’—oh, that pitiful old song, with its sweet, reproachful plaint! I seemed to hear it in a sort of dream. I was thinking how Brookfield would look to-morrow. I was longing to hear the rooks cawing over my head, to see the elms with the evening light on them, to feel Virginia's arms round me. I woke up with a start. Olga was watching me. There was a smile on her face.

‘Where is Basil, my dear?’

‘He has gone down to smoke his cigarette in the square. He will not be long. Do you know you have been asleep, Aunt Catherine? We would not disturb you.’

‘I thought I was at Brookfield. Ah, the woman has stopped singing now. I am so tired of that song. I think I will go and look at Reggie, just to see he is all right. I shall not be long, and then we will have some tea to wake us up.’

Reggie was asleep, and the chamber-maid—a pleasant-looking young woman—was still beside him. Her work was over for the evening, she said. She could wait until the young lady came to relieve her, so I went down again. Our sitting-room was at the end of a long corridor. As I walked slowly down it, a gentleman coming up the staircase attracted my attention. He was a tall man, with iron-gray hair, and from his dress was evidently a clergyman. Something in his walk struck me as familiar. The next moment he accosted me.

‘Would you be so good as to tell me——’ he began, and then he stopped. I suppose I was looking at him strangely.

‘Mr. Fleming!’

‘Catherine—good heavens!’

And then for a moment there was no other word. I think for

the minute he could not speak. It was so sudden, so unexpected, after all those years.

I am afraid my first speech was wholly stupid.

'How could you recognise me?'

'I might ask you the same question,' and he gave a nervous laugh. 'It was your expression, and the way you looked at me; but——'

He did not finish his sentence, but I could see then the old keen look that used to read me so truly.

In spite of the joy of this meeting, I shrank a little from his scrutiny.

'I have changed, of course—eight-and-twenty years would change any one. If you had passed me, I should have had no right to be hurt. A man is different. A woman ages more quickly.'

I hardly knew what I was saying in my nervousness, for he was still holding my hand, and the clear gray eyes were still reading me.

'Eight-and-twenty years! is it really so long as that, Catherine?—I beg your pardon, Miss Sefton; but'—dropping my hand and looking away from me—'I should have known you anywhere; you are wonderfully little changed considering! We are both middle-aged people; but my life has been a hard one. I shall be glad to hear that yours has been smooth.'

I forgot to return any answer to this, though he spoke in a questioning tone. Oh, I knew well that his life had been hard! It was stamped on his thin, careworn face; the weary stoop of his shoulders told it. In a certain sense he had aged more than I had; only the vivid brightness of his eyes, and the quick, energetic voice, recalled the Robert Fleming of old. He had grown gray, too; but I had known that before.

More than one person had passed and had looked at us curiously; every moment some door opened into the corridor.

'We cannot stop here,' I said hurriedly. 'Our sitting-room is just by; will you come in?'

'I will come by and by,' he returned rather absently; 'but there is a friend I must see first. Number eighty-four. Yes, that was what they told me downstairs.'

'Number eighty-four is our sitting-room,' I observed, smiling.

He looked so perplexed at this that I was about to explain, when an exclamation behind us made us turn quickly. Basil was springing up the staircase three steps at a time.

'So you have come?' was all he said; but the look the two men interchanged, and the way they grasped each other's hand,

was enough to tell me what they were to each other. As for Mr. Fleming's face, it was illuminated.

'My dear boy, have I ever failed to come when you sent for me?'

'Never—never, my dear old friend!'

'Basil, do you mean to tell me that you sent for Mr. Fleming?'

'Why, of course!' with an astonished look at me. 'I told you that I telegraphed from St. Croix. Have you forgotten that, Aunt Catherine?'

But before I could answer Mr. Fleming interrupted us; he was looking from one to the other in the utmost perplexity.

'Do you know this lady, Basil? She used to be a friend of mine in the old time.'

'So she told me. Look here, Mr. Fleming: you ought to have waited for my letter—it would have explained everything—instead of rushing up to London in this impulsive way. I was thinking about you just now as I was smoking in the square. "I shouldn't wonder if the dear old man puts in an appearance to-night," that was what I said to myself; and then, as I came upstairs, I saw you and Aunt Catherine together.'

'My dear boy, will you answer my question? Are you a relative of my old friend, Miss Sefton?'

But, after all, I would not let Basil answer.

'He is Virginia's son!' I returned quickly. 'Basil is her boy, and mine. He is our father's heir—his own lawful grandson; and it is you—you who have cherished our boy all these years! Thank God that we have met at last, and I can thank you for all your goodness to Basil!'

He was very much surprised; he grew quite pale with emotion. I do not think he could have heard such news and not be moved by it.

'Come,' said Basil, throwing his arm lightly over his shoulders, 'we cannot stand out here any longer talking about our private affairs. There is only Miss Leigh in the sitting-room, and she knows everything. Come in, Aunt Catherine,' and we followed him at once.

Olga certainly looked surprised at our abrupt entrance; but at Basil's first word she came up to Mr. Fleming and gave him her hand.

'You are Mr. Basil's friend,' she said in her pretty girlish way. 'Oh, we know all about you; he is always talking of you! I am so glad that you have come at last; it is a great pleasure—is it not, Aunt Catherine?' and then she gave me a quick, loving look. 'Now I must go to Reggie; and there is so much that you three

will have to say to each other ;' and before any of us could stop her she had left the room.

I sat down by the open window, and left Basil undisturbed to tell his story. Mr. Fleming made him go back to the beginning. He described his life in the pavilion ; his first meeting with Olga ; our kindness to Reggie ; the child's illness, and all that followed ; Père Lefevre's story ; and the visit to Lizette Dupont.

'Ah, poor Lizette ! I remember her well !' observed Mr. Fleming, with much feeling. 'She was a faithful creature. But for her you would have fared badly, Basil. How strange, how marvellous, it all seems ! To think all these years I had a Sefton living under my roof ; that the boy whom I thought was friendless and penniless was the heir to Brookfield Hall ! Leave me to think over it for a moment ; your story has almost taken my breath away.'

'Aunt Catherine shall make us some tea,' returned Basil gaily. 'I am thirsty with so much talking. I have had more than my share.' Then, as he followed me to the table, he said curiously : 'What was the waiter saying to you just now ? was it about Miss Leigh ?'

'Yes ; Olga had pencilled me a little note. Reggie was awake and she could not leave him, so she wished us all good-night. The chamber-maid had brought her some tea, and she was quite comfortable, and she said again how glad she was Mr. Fleming had come.'

'Miss Leigh knows exactly when to efface herself. Yes, it is just like her ; but she would not have been in the way.' Mr. Fleming overheard him as he joined us.

'Who is that young lady with the pretty voice—whom I fear that I have banished from the room ? is she a *protégée* of yours, Miss Sefton ?'

'Yes, Virginia and I are very fond of her. Olga is charming when one knows her well. Do you remember Fircroft, that old red house near the church ? she lives there with her brother. Mr. Leigh is our curate-in-charge.'

'Yes, I remember Fircroft ; it was to let in my time ; old Miss Crowder had just died. When I have time I must ask after a few of my Brookfield friends. I have a tenacious memory—it will astonish you. But there is another subject we have not mentioned : I have not yet asked after your wife, Basil.' His voice was grave, and he looked fixedly at the young man as he spoke.

'She is well ; at least, I believe so,' returned Basil in an embarrassed tone. 'She is with George at present.'

The anxious look deepened on Mr. Fleming's face.

'My dear boy, you have not left her ?'

'Only for a month or two; one must have change sometimes. Holloway was driving me mad, so I thought it best to go away for a little. She allowed me to take the boy; I could not have gone without him; she knew that.'

'And things are no better?'

'They never will be. George manages to keep her straight for a little; but it never lasts long—it never can with Aline.'

'Poor girl! poor girl! and yet in her way she is good to you; are you'—and then he looked at me and hesitated—'do you mean to bring your wife to Brookfield Hall?'

'I suppose I must;' but I interposed:

'We shall go and fetch her together. Basil's burdens are ours now; we must share them together. If he be unhappy, we shall be unhappy too.'

A peculiar softness came into Mr. Fleming's eyes; but he looked at Basil, not at me.

'You will not be unhappy, my boy, with such friends to help you. Your wife is young, there may be hope still; do not leave her with her brother too long. Mr. Barton is a good man in his way; but we must not shift our responsibilities to other men's shoulders; no one can relieve you of a husband's duty to that poor girl.'

Basil flushed as though the advice were unpalatable to him; he threw up his head a little proudly. 'I know; you need not tell me,' he said bitterly. 'I have brought the misery on myself and must abide by it. If a man acts like a fool, he must pay for it.'

It was the old reckless tone. As he heard it, Mr. Fleming rose and put his hand on his shoulder. 'I am at my old quarters, and it is getting late; will you walk across the Park with me?—you can smoke your cigarette and we can finish our talk.' And then I knew that he wanted to be alone with Basil, his boy as well as mine—that my presence was a restraint. I thought Basil agreed to this proposition a little reluctantly; perhaps he dreaded the clear-sighted judgment of his Mentor; but Mr. Fleming did not appear to notice it. The sudden leave-taking troubled me; he had said so little to me or I to him; it was Basil who had engrossed him. A chilly feeling of disappointment crept over me as I thought how long it might be before we met again.

To my surprise he seemed to answer this thought.

'It is not good-bye,' he said quietly; 'Basil tells me that you do not leave until midday to-morrow. I should like to come and see you again—may I?'

'I shall be very glad.'

‘Then I will come.’ He seemed to wait until Basil had left the room, and then he came a little closer.

‘I should like to talk to you about Basil; he has been very dear all these years—he is still—I have missed him terribly.’

‘I am afraid he has not always treated you well.’

‘Never mind that now; with all his faults he has been like a son to me. Well, it has been a great pleasure finding you two together; good-bye—God bless you!’ and before I could answer he was gone.

The room looked a little solitary, and I went up to Olga. She was sitting by the open window; she seemed surprised to see me.

‘Has Mr. Fleming gone already?’

‘Yes, dear, and he has taken Basil with him. He wanted a long quiet talk with him. Why have you not gone to bed, Olga? And you are so tired.’

‘Not so very tired’—wrapping my arms round her and leaning against me, a favourite action of hers in some moods. ‘Aunt Catherine, were you not very glad to meet your old friend again?’

‘Very glad indeed.’

‘I should have liked to have seen more of him; but of course I knew I was in the way. He is just what I thought. Do you know, his face reminds me a little of yours. No; I cannot explain it’—as I uttered an incredulous exclamation—‘but you have both got the same clear, earnest look—what Jessie calls a trustable look.’

‘My dear, I am very much obliged to you and Jessie.’

‘He is not young, of course—his hair is quite gray. How old did you say he was?’

‘Mr. Fleming must be fifty; his work has aged him.’

‘Yes; and then his life has not been a happy one.’

‘We do not know that, Olga,’ rather quickly.

‘Do we not?’ with a little laugh. ‘Well, I must not keep you here talking. I suppose he is coming again to-morrow?’

‘I do not know why you should suppose any such thing; but for once you happen to be correct.’

‘It would be very strange if he did not come. He and Mr. Basil must want to be together.’

‘Oh yes, of course;’ and then she kissed me affectionately and let me go.

I was glad to be alone with my own thoughts. After all these years God had granted me my wish: I had looked in the face of Robert Fleming again—the man to whom I had plighted my girlish troth, for whose sake I had lived single—and the meeting had not disappointed me. I had seen the quick flash of joy in his eyes as he

pronounced my name. Would he have called me Catherine in that momentary confusion if the past had been wholly obliterated from his mind? if the girl Catherine had been forgotten? I held to this thread of comfort firmly, when the cold waters of common-sense came to damp my enthusiasm.

Let me confess it: I did not long remain happy. Many a woman of my age has these sudden chills of introspection and retrospection, these dim brooding moods, when we are brought face to face with our inner selves, when we look with dreary, pitying eyes on our dead youth, on the hopes that lie in faded heaps like autumn leaves. All those years, in which we might have been so happy—does not the strain run after that fashion? All those fresh womanly feelings wasted in waiting for something that never came—in that wistful watching that too often ends in heart-sickness and despair!

After all, if he had cared for me as I had cared for him, would he not have trampled down his pride underfoot and come back to me—not in my father's lifetime, perhaps, but when his death had set me free? And—and—I will write it here—I had expected him month after month, and year after year, and he had made no sign! No; he had never come back to the Catherine he had so tenderly loved, whom, strong man as he was, it almost broke his heart to give up! But in my inmost mind I had not been angry with him. It was his notion of honour—strained and misplaced, perhaps, but still a sense of honour—that had refused to seek out the heiress. Most likely he thought himself forgotten. He had not loved again, that was certain; and this knowledge, poor and meagre as it was, was the abiding sweetness of my life.

What poor creatures we women are! We can bear disappointment, suspense, unhappiness, but we cannot endure that one whom we love should forget us. No; this one thing we cannot bear!

It was some time before I could reason and school myself into calmness; as the bitter waters of the past, that had submerged all my youthful hopes, seemed to rise again before my eyes, a sort of dual voice seemed to oppose vague utterances.

'After all, you have had a happy life,' one seemed to say. 'Many women have to do without love and marriage—it is Kismet, Fate, the will of God. You have had your freedom, wealth, plenty of work, friends to cheer your leisure.'

'Yes, but I have been lonely through it all,' murmured that other unbidden voice. 'I have had no strong arm to lean upon; all my life I have wanted my other self. When I have seen wives with their husbands, mothers with their children, I have

felt my freedom an irksome thing, my wealth mere emptiness. The will of God! Ah, well, you are right. It may be so; but I think our heavenly Father knows why the eyes of women are so often dim, and their tears do not make Him angry.'

'Most likely you have cared for Robert Fleming more than he has cared for you,' went on the voice; 'this reflection ought to humiliate you. A little while ago you had settled to make him your heir.'

'I do not feel humiliated; such a reflection would not trouble me for a moment. What does it matter on which side the love lies? He was my master once, and taught me all I knew of good; I had no religion until he instilled it; I owe my better self to him—to his high-minded example; he loved me once: that is sufficient.'

'This is mere sophistical nonsense. At your age one should think more wisely.'

'It is the truth, and I know no other. As long as Robert Fleming lives, the world will be richer to me. I ask nothing from him but friendship, esteem, a kindly recollection of the past; more would embarrass—would trouble me—would disturb my sense of fitness. I neither ask nor desire it; but if I could only do him some good, I think I should die happier;' and with this curious confession of womanly faith I triumphed over my dissentient voice.

I grew quite reasonable at last, and chided myself in earnest for the hours I had wasted in fruitless regrets. 'You are not the only one,' I said to myself severely, 'whom Heaven has deprived of complete satisfaction in this world. There are so many widowed lives—meek, uncomplaining ones—lives so patiently borne that even the angels must wonder at them, and you—you have had so many blessings;' and then, touched and humbled, I knelt down to say my thanksgiving, and after that I slept as sweetly as ever; and when morning came I woke quite happily, for was I not going home with Basil? and was that not happiness enough? besides which—but I have written enough on that subject.

When we met at breakfast it was Basil who looked as though he had not slept. He did not deny the charge.

'One can't stand so much excitement,' he said, laughing rather nervously. 'I suppose that long talk unsettled me, and then I kept thinking about my mother. I cannot help dreading the meeting. What am I to say to her, and she to me, when we are strangers to each other?' and then he broke off as Olga came into the room with Reggie, and it seemed a relief to him to take the

little fellow in his arms. Poor Basil! I could feel for him; it was terribly embarrassing.

Mr. Fleming came quite early. Basil took Reggie half across the Park to meet him, and they all came in together. Basil had almost lost that fagged, harassed look. As soon as Mr. Fleming had shaken hands with us, Basil accosted me eagerly:

‘Aunt Catherine, such a capital idea has come into my head: why should not Mr. Fleming come down with us to Brookfield?’

‘To Brookfield?’ I faltered.

‘Yes; it will make things easier for all of us. I should like it. I should feel more like myself if he were there to back me up; and my mother ought to see him, you know.’

‘My dear boy, it is you who are master; you may surely ask whom you will to your own house.’

‘I never thought of that,’ with a flush; ‘and I will do nothing without your permission. Shall he come, Aunt Catherine?’

‘If he will be so good,’ I returned, smiling.

Mr. Fleming had remained silent; but I could see this wish on Basil’s part touched him profoundly.

‘Will you come, Mr. Fleming?’

‘Go and ask him, Reggie,’ whispered Basil in his boy’s ear; and the child, in his ready, sweet obedience, ran up to him. Mr. Fleming stooped over him.

‘What is it, my little fellow?’ he said gently.

‘Reggie wants you to come, and father too, and my Dear——’ looking round for Olga, ‘and Aunt Cathie,’ for he could not pronounce my name.

‘What, all — everybody? I think I must come, Reggie; father’s wishes have always been paramount with me. But this young lady,’ looking at Olga with kindly, observant eyes, ‘I think you made a mistake there;’ and then he put down the child and walked to the window; and, after a moment’s hesitation, Basil followed him, and they talked earnestly together; and, though Olga and I could not hear what they were saying, there was a pleased look on Mr. Fleming’s face—a bright, happy look that told us volumes.

CHAPTER XXIX

‘WELCOME HOME, MY DEAR’

‘O Lord ! my boy, my Arthur, my fair son !
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world !
My widow comfort, and my sorrow’s cure.’

King John.

‘O Lord, that lends me life,
Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.’

Second Part of Henry IV.

JUST before we started, I found myself alone with Mr. Fleming. I had gone upstairs to put on my bonnet, and on my return to the sitting-room I saw him standing at the window apparently lost in thought.

My entrance roused him. As he came towards me, I noticed that he looked younger and brighter than he had yesterday. His shoulders seemed to have lost their stoop. He seemed alert—full of animation.

‘I am glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you,’ he began quickly. ‘I am afraid my boy has been a little impulsive. Are you sure that I shall not be in the way—that Mrs. Lyndhurst will not think it an intrusion?’

‘I can answer for Virginia’s welcome as well as my own,’ I returned gravely. ‘Mr. Fleming, cannot you understand how deeply we are indebted to you? You have been our benefactor as well as Basil’s. When Virginia learns how all these years you have been guarding her treasure, there will be no limit to her gratitude.’

‘You must not say such things to me, Miss Sefton. It troubles me to hear them.’

‘Then they shall not be said. I would not hurt you for the world. Let me tell you instead how glad I am for Basil’s sake that you are with him at this crisis of his life.’

'He is very nervous about this meeting with his mother,' he said thoughtfully. 'He has confessed to me that he dreads it beyond everything. It is unfortunate that Mrs. Lyndhurst would never consent to be photographed, for he cannot picture her in the least. He seemed quite surprised when I told him what a handsome girl she used to be.'

'That is because your description does not tally with ours. Eight-and-twenty years ago, I grant you, Virginia was a beautiful creature. When you see her, you will not recognise her as you recognised me.'

'Is she so changed?'

'Changed! that is not the word. Strangers have often told me that it made their hearts ache only to look at her. Her troubles have been too much for her. Her nerves have suffered.'

'I understand—Basil told me a great deal last night.'

'He says very little about his mother to me, and I am half afraid to question him. I should like to know what he really feels about her.'

'It is difficult to judge,' he replied after a moment's hesitation. 'He is very guarded. He does not speak openly even to me. I can see he feels her desertion of him in his helpless infancy very keenly, and yet no word of blame passes his lips; but it has chilled him. No, you must not grieve,' as the tears rose to my eyes, and he looked at me very kindly. 'It is only natural he should feel it, but we must hope that mother and son will soon be drawn together.'

'I think if she fails to win his love my poor Virginia will break her heart. Any coldness on Basil's part will crush her. Mr. Fleming, will you tell him so? I have gone through so much that I feel I can bear no more.'

'I would willingly spare you all pain if I could,' he returned gently; 'but, pardon me, I think I understand Basil better than you do. We must leave him to himself; he has a good heart. We must trust that. Any advice would only embarrass him. You saw for yourself last night how hard it is for him to take even a word from me. It has always been like that—his pride has been his bane.'

'He has never been proud with me.'

'That is because you are so gentle with him. I can see for myself how much influence you have with him already. He was talking to me about you last night. He thinks there is no one like you. You would have been pleased to hear him.'

'Mr. Fleming, will you tell me one thing: Is it your opinion that Basil is to blame at all with regard to his wife?'

He looked sorry that I had asked the question. He hesitated, and seemed unwilling to answer.

'You have put a very difficult question. I should have liked you to judge for yourself. Basil is very much to be pitied. No one could deny that he leads a wretched life with that poor girl; but it has always been my opinion that he might have done more for her in the beginning.'

'I am afraid he has ceased to love her.'

'It was never real love,' he returned warmly. 'It was just a young man's fancy for a handsome girl that would have cooled in a month or two. He very soon grew weary of her. A woman of her calibre could never hold him long. When I first saw her, I knew there would be no happiness for him in the future. Poor boy! he needed more than she could give him, and yet she loves him with all the strength of her undisciplined nature.'

'You think that Aline loves him. Basil assures me that she is quite indifferent—that she seldom speaks to him.'

'That comes from her sullen temper. She is jealous, too; and she knows that she has forfeited all claims to his respect. I believe in her way the poor girl suffers terribly. She has fits of remorse that are quite distressing to witness. I believe if Basil spoke kindly to her then she would be ready to die for him; but he has lost all heart and interest. He tells me that he never troubles himself now about her moods.'

'Mr. Fleming, you will think me hard, too; but I am afraid I take Basil's part. How is he to bear with such a woman?'

'You have not seen her,' he answered quickly. 'I should not be surprised if she interested you in spite of yourself; there are possibilities even in her nature, poor thing! She is the victim of others' sins; an hereditary taint is in her blood. Her brother knows this, and pities and shields her; it is only her husband who has no mercy.'

'But what would you have him do? He is going to bring her home.'

'Yes, he will bring her home; but will he be good to her? Will he watch over her, and keep the deadly poison away? Will he try to wean her from her fatal habit by surrounding her with other influences, and teaching her self-respect? Will he stay with her instead of rushing away to seek distraction for himself, and taking his boy with him? Miss Sefton, you must not think me hard; my heart bleeds for him; but right is right. Basil has made that girl his wife, and he must do his duty by her, as other men have done theirs. It is no question of love; it is clear,

manifest duty. This is what I have told him, and he does not contradict me.'

'No, he will not contradict you; but his life will be terribly difficult—and he is so young.'

'She is young too.'

'Yes, I know;,' and then we could say no more, as we heard Basil's voice outside.

I was glad to have had even this brief talk. I knew now what were Mr. Fleming's opinions with regard to Aline. In some respects they corroborated the impressions I had already formed. I felt Basil had not been faultless—his long absences, his restless wanderings, his absorption in his boy, had widened the breach between husband and wife. Aline had lost all incentive to self-control; she despaired of regaining Basil's love; most likely she was trying to drown her sense of neglect and wretchedness; but, on the other hand, what superhuman patience was needed to endure the daily companionship of such a woman! It was easy for a man like Mr. Fleming to preach the duty he so nobly practised of self-abnegation; but for Basil, with his sensitive nature, his pride, his impatient irritability, it was more difficult; and in my heart I could not blame him; and he had already suffered so much.

I think but for Mr. Fleming we should have been a silent party; but he helped us all to feel more natural and at our ease. Basil's nervousness seemed to increase as we drew towards our journey's end; he talked fitfully. As we slackened speed, Olga, who had been very quiet, suddenly brightened.

'Oh, there is Jem!' she said. 'Rollo, look! there is dear old Jem!' and Rollo whined expectantly, as though he understood.

'Is that your brother?' exclaimed Basil; 'I should like to shake hands with him. What a fine-looking fellow!'

But I doubt if Olga heard him, for she was waving and kissing her hand to Jem. I smile now when I recall Jem's look of astonishment as the two gentlemen followed us out of the carriage. As Basil's dark face peered over my shoulder, I heard Jem whisper in a sort of disgusted aside:

'Why, you haven't brought that fellow Fleming over with you, surely?'

I only hoped it was not audible. Olga hardly knew how to answer, so I thought it politic to explain matters.

'This is my old friend Mr. Fleming, Jem; but now let me introduce you to my nephew, Basil Lyndhurst. Basil, this is Miss Leigh's brother, of whom you have heard so much.'

Jem's face was a study as they shook hands rather stiffly. The

whole thing was so droll that Olga and I began to laugh ; but this did not mend matters.

'I was not aware you had a nephew, Miss Sefton,' replied Jem, in a dignified manner, and turning very red. (He had never called me anything but Aunt Catherine for years.) 'I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lyndhurst. Olga, I have got a truck for your luggage. I thought you would like the walk up to Fircroft.'

'Yes, I will come, Jem. Dear Aunt Catherine, good-bye until to-morrow ! Give my love to Mrs. Lyndhurst.'

'But you will bring Jem with you to-morrow, Olga ? I want him and Basil to be good friends.'

'I will bring him if he will come. Good-bye, Mr. Basil ! Good-bye, my darling Reggie !' kneeling on the ground to kiss him.

Jem watched these proceedings a little stonily. When she had finished, he took off his hat to us all with a grand sweep, and drew Olga's hand through his arm, and hurried her away. I smiled to myself as I looked after them. Poor Olga ! she would have some trouble in soothing him. Jem was not one to like mysteries ; he had been too much taken by surprise, and he was ruffled in consequence. Basil made a little speech presently that amused me still more.

'Mr. Leigh seems rather haughty for such a frank-looking fellow. On the whole, he did not seem quite pleased with me.'

'You don't know Jem,' was my reply ; 'he will be quite different to-morrow. He thinks Olga ought to have prepared him ; he hates surprises. Never mind ; there is our faithful old Jennings with the carriage. You must speak to him, Basil.'

Basil's nervousness seemed to return as he seated himself beside me, for Mr. Fleming insisted on taking the opposite place. Olga looked up at us as we passed with a tremulous little smile, and waved her hand. Jem was still holding her arm ; he raised his hat stiffly, with the gravity of a young judge. Basil looked back at them once or twice.

'There is Fircroft,' I said presently ; 'do you hear the rooks, Basil ? Look ! we shall turn into the avenue directly—you can see the Hall now ; and—and—welcome home, my dear !'

He pressed my hand, but did not answer ; he had grown strangely pale, and there was a strained look in his eyes, as though he were expecting to see some one. How grandly the rooks were cawing over our heads—as though they were greeting the long-lost heir ! I doubt whether Basil even heard them, any more than he noticed the flecks of golden sunshine on the green turf, or the

play of light and shadow in the branches of the elms. My dear old home! How lovely it looked that September afternoon! My eyes were misty with unshed tears; a flood of gratitude was in my heart. Oh, how good Providence had been to us! I looked at Mr. Fleming; his grave answering glance, so full of unspoken sympathy, of complete understanding, satisfied me. I was not the only one to rejoice that day!

The Hall door was wide open; I could see Bennett's white head, with our old housekeeper, Mrs. Larkins, behind him. As the carriage stopped, and Reynolds sprang from the box to open the door, I saw Marsden cross the hall hurriedly, as though in search of her mistress.

I took Basil's hand as we stood together on the threshold; he had a dazed look, as though he were in a dream; he acknowledged the servants' respectful greeting almost mechanically.

'Mrs. Lyndhurst is in the drawing-room, ma'am,' Bennett said in my ear; and I put my hand on Basil's arm to rouse him.

'Come, my dear, come! We must not keep your mother waiting; she is an invalid, remember;' and I drew him on.

Once he stumbled slightly; the hall was dark after the sunshine outside, and the oak floor slippery to unused footsteps. I felt him draw his breath hard as Bennett opened the drawing-room door. And then for the moment I thought I was dreaming, too; for the Virginia who stood in the middle of the room to receive us was not the Virginia I had left—who had lived with me all these years. For a second I did not recognise her.

The frail graceful figure that seemed always bowed by some mysterious weakness was erect and tall; in place of the straight black folds of her widowlike stuff dress, she wore black velvet, and that in spite of the summer warmth. A little head-dress of costly lace just shaded the silvery hair, and as I crossed the room I could see she had a diamond ornament at her throat, and that her hands were blazing with diamond rings—Virginia, who had not worn jewels for five-and-twenty years! But how deathly was the marble paleness of her face as she stretched out her hands tremblingly to her boy.

'My son—my own son!'

'Mother!'

Just that one word, uttered under his breath, as though that low passionate utterance compelled response and recognition; and as she looked up in his face with those pleading eyes, he stooped and kissed her quietly, reverently on the cheek. He told me afterwards that the touch of that cold thin cheek gave him a sort of shock. As for Virginia, that timid, quiet caress from the full-

grown man, who was her son and yet a stranger, seemed to unseal the pent-up emotion; she trembled so violently that I thought she would have fallen, and Basil quickly put his arm round her and drew her to a seat. She kept hold of his hand.

'You are very kind,' she gasped. 'Will you sit down beside me? you are so tall'—trying to smile—'and I—I want to see my son.'

He obeyed her at once, but he seemed nervous and embarrassed under that long fixed look. As for me, I knew what it meant; the mother's eyes were seeking some resemblance she feared to see. Oh, she had found it!

'Catherine!' How well I knew that sharp thinness of voice! 'Catherine, he is like Paul! It is Paul's mouth—his handsome mouth—and he has his father's chin. You told me in your letter that there was no likeness: you are wrong; and, look, he has Paul's hand!—I should have known that hand anywhere!'

'What does it matter?' I returned, somewhat alarmed at this; 'Basil does not take after his father in anything else.'

'No'—after a moment's hesitation—'and, after all, I am glad that it should be so; it makes him still more my son. I can see the likeness for myself. Basil'—how softly and tenderly she pronounced his name!—'you must not mind anything I have said. I have suffered so much; and all these years, these long, cruel years, I have been childless.'

'Yes, I know;' but he did not look at her as he spoke.

I could see his position tried him terribly—that he did not know what to say to her. Whose fault was it that he had been a stranger to his home all those years? that he had been forsaken in his helpless infancy and cast upon the compassion of strangers? Could he tell her so? But the thought would not be banished; it kept him silent.

An agonised expression crossed Virginia's face, as though she read his silence truly.

'Catherine, do you see? he has nothing to say to me! My son turns from me—from me, his mother! He has hardened his heart against me because of that past sin of mine! He has judged me already; and I—what shall I do?'

She wrung her hands, and it was pitiful to see her poor quivering face. It was too much for Basil; he started up, and began pacing the room. It was some minutes before he could calm himself sufficiently to speak to her, and all the time she sat, poor soul! watching him, and sighing as though her heart would break. Presently he came back to us.

'Mother,' he said almost harshly, but I saw he had some diffi-

culty in keeping himself in hand, 'you ought not to have said that—that should never have been mentioned between you and me. What is past is past. You are wrong; your son does not judge his mother; he has too many sins of his own.'

He sank down on the couch beside her and covered his face with his hands; his strong young frame seemed shaking with emotion.

'Virginia,' I said gently, 'Basil is right; you ought not to have spoken to him in that way. He does not wish to remember the past; you must never recall it to him. It is a new life that is beginning for you both to-day—a new and happier life.'

'Is it?' she returned softly, and she laid her hand on his arm. She was his mother, but she dare not venture on a closer caress. 'Yes, I know; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

We grew calmer by degrees. Basil was the first to recover himself. I saw by his manner that he was anxious to efface the impression from Virginia's mind, to place things on a more natural footing. She had entreated him with tears to forgive her, and his answer had soothed her.

'It is not for a parent to ask forgiveness of a child,' he had said. 'My father's sins have been so great that I wonder you do not hate me for my likeness to him. Do not let there be any such question between us.'

'Then you do forgive me, Basil?'

'What? again, mother? And, after all, I have no right; but, if you will have it, I freely forgive you. Now that is finished, and we will never refer to it again. And I want you to see my boy; you have two children, you know!'

'Your boy!' and her manner was a little bewildered.

Had she forgotten all I had told her in my letter of Basil's unhappy marriage?

'Yes—Reggie. Will you fetch him, Aunt Catherine? Do you mind? I do not know my way about the house;' and I went willingly.

It was some minutes before I returned to the room; I thought it was better to leave them together. On our way through the hall I endeavoured to impress on Reggie's mind that he was going to see his grandmother. I wanted him to say the word after me, but he refused.

'Too long,' he said, shaking his head; 'Reggie don't like it!'

I am afraid we had all spoiled him, and indulged his childish whims. He was dressed in his white sailor's suit, and, in spite of

the loss of his hair, he looked so delicately pretty that I knew how Virginia would admire him. His erect little figure was so trim and graceful; he carried his head with such dignity, and he was such a friendly, loving little creature.

He marched up straight to his father and stood beside him, looking with childish curiosity at Virginia's pale face.

'Is that lady Reggie's Gran?' he asked at last.

'Yes, dear. Will you give her a kiss?'

It was evident Reggie did not relish the idea of the kiss; but he was accustomed to obey his father's slightest word, so he put up his face at once.

'How do you do, Gran?' he said gravely; and Virginia caught him in her arms and burst into tears.

Reggie regarded her with astonished eyes.

'Has any one been naughty, father?' he asked in great perplexity. 'Why does Gran cry?'

'Let me cry, darling; it does me good. Oh, Cathy, Cathy! look at this dear little face, and think—think of that little child I never saw—that lonely little child who never knew his mother!' and for a little while she sobbed bitterly, and refused to be comforted.

Reggie looked so frightened that Basil took him on his knee, and after a time we were obliged to send him away. Virginia was becoming hysterical; her frail form could ill support her overcharged feelings. It was Basil who proposed sending for Mr. Fleming—I had not once thought of him. I was a little dubious as to the result, but, as it proved, Basil was right.

He had been accustomed to all forms of mental distress; his very first words as he took her hand seemed to soothe her.

'All this has been too much for you,' he said gently. 'You have no strength left to thank God for the great blessing He has vouchsafed you to-day. Miss Sefton, I think you must give your sister some wine, and then she will feel better;' and without heeding her wild sobs he said a few grave, strong words that seemed to lift her out of her self-abasement and place her on a higher level.

It was wonderful to hear him talk. He seemed to understand just how she felt.

'Basil,' he said, turning to him by and by, 'you have a grand task before you: you have to compensate your mother for all her past unhappiness; you have to win her love and confidence.'

'The love is won already,' she returned, with a wan smile.

'So much the better,' he returned heartily. 'But, Mrs. Lyndhurst, your son needs something more than love at your hand—he

will want real help and sympathy. He has told you about his wife ?'

'No,' she said timidly. 'There has been no time, and I have troubled him so ; but Catherine said something in her letter. You are not happy, Basil ?'

'No, mother, I am not happy. Aline is a great trouble to me.'

'Aline—is that your wife's name? My dear, you must tell me everything, and I will help you. We will both help him—will we not, Catherine? There is nothing—nothing we will not do. You shall not be unhappy, my son, if your mother can prevent it. There will be no sacrifice too great—you may be sure of that.'

'Will you do something for me now, mother?' taking her hand.

It was pathetic to see how she brightened every time he said that word ; she looked at him with unutterable tenderness as he spoke.

'Yes, surely, Basil.'

'Will you go and rest now? It hurts me to see you look so frightfully pale. You are ill, though you do not say so. I should be happier in my mind if you would rest.'

'I will go, then,' rising at once. 'Cathy, will you come to me presently?—not now ; I must be alone a little. Thank you, my dear,' as Basil gave her his arm, and led her to the door.

I did not hear what she said to him, but there were a few words on her part, and then he stooped over her again and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXX

'FRIENDS FOR LIFE'

'Who revered his conscience as his king.'

TENNYSON.

'Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.'

Hamlet.

I WAS perfectly aware of the reason that made Mr. Fleming remember suddenly that he had an important letter to write before the evening post. Like Olga, he knew when to efface himself; some unerring intuition told him that I should prefer to be alone with Basil. The moment the door closed after him, I went up to Basil and took his two hands.

'Well, my dear?'

He looked at me with an expression that was difficult to define—a curious mingling of pleasure and sadness.

'Aunt Catherine,' he said slowly, 'I am glad my mother is like that.'

'Oh, Basil! Really and truly? Then you are not disappointed in her?'

'No'—drawing a long breath—'but you must not question me too closely; you must give me time. Do you not see'—very gravely—'what a trial this has been to both of us—to her as well as to me? One hardly dared to speak for fear of wounding the other; there was a barrier across which we seemed to look at each other. Thank God it is over—that I shall never have to live through such an hour again!'

'Dear Basil, I quite understand how you felt.'

'I think when it came to the point that I would rather have walked up to the cannon's mouth than have entered that room. All these days I have been saying to myself, "If I should be dis-

appointed in my mother!" I was growing quite morbid over the idea.'

'Very few men have to pass through such an ordeal; but it has ended well.'

'Yes, it has ended well; no one could have been kinder. Do you know, Aunt Catherine, I was glad in my heart when she spoke of my likeness to my father; it seemed somehow more satisfactory; but I would rather have resembled my mother.'

'I am so pleased to hear you say that.'

'Why, she is lovely!' he returned quickly. 'When she spoke, something in her voice reminded me of you; but you are not really alike.'

'Not in the least.'

'No, there could not be two sisters more unlike each other. I can understand now what Mr. Fleming told me about her beauty—she is very sweet-looking; but of course one can see what her life has been; there is one thing I am sure that she needs: a son to take care of her.'

'My dear, it makes me so happy to hear you talk in this way! I was so afraid——' but something in his look warned me not to say any more.

'I know what you were going to say,' he returned; 'but that is a forbidden subject; for Heaven's sake, Aunt Catherine, let the dead past bury its dead. Why should we try to disinter the ghastly thing? That is the worst of women, they are so fond of moral dissection; even a good woman knows the use of a scalpel.'

'You are very hard on us,' pretending to look offended; but he was too much in earnest to heed me.

'Men are more generous; when they forgive, they forgive thoroughly, and with no *arrière-pensée*; that is how I feel about things. We must wipe out the past; there must be no allusion to it—no painful remembrance: this is what I feel strongly. Do you not see how much need I have to forget? If I had lived here under my mother's roof, I should never have met Aline. I—I dare not think of it;' there was a cloud upon his face as he spoke—a concentrated bitterness in his voice; then he recovered himself: 'For pity's sake let me keep that thought away; it would madden me to think of what might have been. Aunt Catherine,' looking at me wistfully, 'I want to be a better sort of fellow; I want to do my duty, and not to think of my own happiness. You must help me with Aline. You must keep me up to things; neither she nor I must disgrace my mother, who has suffered so much all her life.'

I was so touched that I could not answer him ; if only Mr. Fleming had heard him !

'Do not let us talk any more,' he said presently ; 'all this has taken it out of me ; I feel dead tired, as though I had walked twenty miles. Will you come out in the garden ? a little fresh air will do me good ; do you mind ?'

As though I minded anything ! He opened the glass door, and we stepped out on the lawn. I showed him everything ; the Lady's Walk, and my favourite Elizabethan garden, with the sundial and peacocks. He wanted to fetch Reggie at once to see them ; but I told him the child would be having his tea in the nursery, and begged him not to disturb him. I could see Reggie was in his thoughts perpetually.

'Fancy the little chap chasing butterflies over that lawn !' he said once, 'and how pleased he will be with the honeysuckle arbour ! He must have a garden of his own—that little bed we passed just now. And he will take up his flowers to see how they grow ! and he will water them six times a day out of his new watering-pot ; can't you fancy him doing it ?' Then, by and by : 'That was a velvet dress my mother wore, was it not ? I always had a fancy for velvet. Don't you think Reg might have a velvet suit with a lace collar ? he would look like a picture ! I saw a little boy once dressed like that, and it struck me then how it would suit Reggie.'

'Oh yes, he would look lovely,' and, just to humour him, I discussed the rival merits of ruby and dark blue velvet. I saw that he was trying to fling off his grave mood. When we had explored the garden, and I wanted him to come in and see the house, he shook his head.

'I could not take in any more to-day,' he said wearily, 'and it is so delicious out here ! Let us take a turn in the avenue and listen to those black-coated fellows. Hark ! what is that ?' as the sudden pealing of bells broke on our ears.

'It is Mr. Leigh's thoughtfulness,' I cried breathlessly. 'Olga had told him, and he has just got the ringers together.'

'Do you mean it is for me ?' looking quite scared.

'Yes, dear ; it is in your honour. It is a welcome to the heir—the young squire of Brookfield. If they had known, Basil—if we had given them time—all your tenants would have been at the station to receive you. There would have been triumphal arches and flags ; the Oddfellows, with their band ; and the vicar—at least, the curate-in-charge—would have made you a speech.'

'Oh, Heaven forbid !' he returned, quite shocked at the idea. 'I could not have undergone it.'

I could not help laughing at his evident discomposure. With all his pride, he had not a spark of vanity; there was nothing little in his nature; his faults were big glaring faults, but there was no meanness.

'All the same, they will feel we have cheated them. We must have a supper and a dance for the tenants later on. You must not shrink from your responsibilities.'

'No,' he said softly; 'I must face everything. How pleased Reggie will be with those bells!'

We were standing in the avenue. I do not know what impulse moved Basil to take off his hat and stand bareheaded and silent. There was a grave, reverent look on his face. 'Please God!' I heard him say, as though speaking to himself. My 'Amen' was inaudible.

I was obliged to leave him at last, and go up to Virginia. As I passed the library, Mr. Fleming came out. The library window commanded a view of the avenue—perhaps he had been watching us.

'Well,' he said, looking at me with a smile, 'is the Squire pleased with his ovation?'

'He seems rather upset by it all. I cannot get him to look over the house, or to pay attention to anything. We must leave him quiet for this one day.'

'His cup is filled to the brim—very little would make it overflow. You are right; we must leave him to get used to his position. I will go out to him, and tell him some Leeds news—any triviality that comes into my head.'

'I have been talking to him about Reggie's frocks.' He laughed at that, and we parted.

I found Virginia lying back in her easy-chair, with her eyes closed, as though she, too, were listening to the bells. She seemed utterly exhausted, and there was a dark look round her mouth; but when she opened her eyes I almost started. In place of their wild, haunted look they had the happy restfulness of a child.

'Cathy, dear Cathy! do you hear the bells? They are ringing in Basil's honour—to welcome my boy to his home. Good Mr. Leigh! I must thank him for this.'

'You are happy, Virginia?' I asked softly, as I knelt down beside her, and looked into her sweet pallid face.

'Happy! I am suffocated with happiness!' putting her hands to her breast. 'Do you know how I felt when he kissed me—the first kiss I have ever had from my child? As though I could die with joy! And when he told me to go and rest I felt then that I had a son.'

'He will be everything to you.'

'He is nobleness itself. There was not a word of reproach, and yet he owes all his unhappiness to his mother. Did you see how his face changed when he spoke of his wife? He is terribly unhappy.'

'I fear he is.'

'I do more than fear it; I am sure of it. There are lines in his face that tell their own story. Cathy, I must confess something: There was one moment when I shrank from him—from my own boy—and that was when I saw his likeness to Paul.'

'I am afraid he noticed it.'

'He shall never notice it again; but for the moment it was so strong. There was the beautiful mouth and chin. Paul's were modelled like a Greek god's. I shut my eyes for an instant, and when I looked again it was still there—the likeness—only the expression was different; there was no cruel sneer on Basil's lips.'

'No, indeed!'

'I am glad he is not handsome; there was something diabolical in Paul's beauty. But his hand!—there again I had a fresh pang. Do you remember Paul's white, muscular hand and filbert-shaped nails? But, of course, you saw him so little. Basil has his father's hand.'

'You should not mind these things, Virginia.'

'I do not! I do not! but for the moment I was overcome. He is a grander man than Paul; and he carries his head like a king. To think my little child has grown into that! All this time I have been trying to thank God; but my heart is too full for words.'

'There are no words needed.'

'No; I just knelt upon the ground, and said nothing. But I think I never prayed so well. Cathy, I cannot be surprised at anything to-day, or I think Mr. Fleming would have surprised me.'

'Did you recognise him, Vi?'—my old girlish name for her.

'Not in the least; but when you mentioned his name I said to myself: "This is Catherine's Mr. Fleming." How gray he has grown!' looking at me a little curiously; 'but he is better-looking now than he used to be.'

'I never thought of his looks.'

'I daresay not. How fond you were of each other in those old days! Ah, my poor father was cruel about that! You were never the same girl after Robert Fleming went away. I

think no parent has a right to come between two people who love each other.'

'Perhaps not. I am of your opinion, Virginia; but, if you please, we will not talk of that old, old story. When you see him again you must talk to him about Basil. He is his boy as well as yours.'

'Yes, I know;' but I could see my words pained her. She would be very jealous of her son's love for others, I knew. I think this made her a little cold in her praises of Mr. Fleming. 'But he is a good man, and we owe him a debt of gratitude,' she finished. 'You must not let me be selfish, Cathy—if I could only overcome this jealousy!—but I cannot bear to think that he took my place all those years.'

Poor Virginia! After all, it was not pure unalloyed happiness. The maternal instinct that had so long been starved and thwarted had to battle fiercely for its rights. Alas! who could give her back those lost years? After all, Basil was right when he decided that the past must be consigned to oblivion: to her dying day the mother's heart would cry out for the little child she had never seen. I tried to persuade Virginia to remain quietly in her room that evening, but neither Marsden nor I could induce her to listen to reason. Her son should not take his place at the head of the table unless she were there to see it. I sent for Basil at last, and at his first word she yielded.

'Mother,' he said almost abruptly, 'it would be impossible for me to eat my dinner if I saw you sitting at the table and looking ready to faint. If you will stay here quietly I will come up and talk to you afterwards.'

'But you will take your proper place, Basil?'

'Not to-night. I shall sit by Aunt Catherine. Why do we need this stiff formal dinner? I shall shock your servants: I have no dress-clothes. I ordered them this morning; but I have only my morning coat.'

'Bennett will understand. He is such an old servant. Catherine, remember to-morrow that my son is to be consulted at what hour he wishes to dine!'

'My dear mother——' in a protesting voice.

'You are master here, Basil. No one shall question your authority. Neither Catherine nor I will obtrude ourselves, my dear,' taking his hand timidly. 'Everything shall be as you wish it.'

'Your wishes will be mine, mother.'

'Let us go now, Virginia, and Basil shall come to you by and by. He has eaten nothing since he has entered the house;' and then she said no more.

I was anxious to get him away. He was looking nervous and uncomfortable again. I knew it pained him to see his mother so humble and submissive. It seemed to put them both in a false position. He spoke out this thought as soon as the door closed behind us.

'Aunt Catherine, you must give my mother a hint. I do not mean to put Aline in her place or yours. We are circumstanced strangely. It is not easy to define things. I will take my place, but Aline is not fit for hers. You will be just as much mistress here as ever. I don't fancy my mother comprehends the situation.'

'Perhaps not—nor, in truth, do I.'

'Things will shape themselves,' he returned in a melancholy voice, and then we entered the dining-room.

I saw a look of surprise flit over Bennett's face as Basil took the chair beside me, and Mr. Fleming seated himself opposite to him. As Reynolds handed the soup, I saw Basil look round the room at the carved antique furniture, the heavily-framed family portraits, the massive flagons and drinking-cups on the sideboard. The bells were still pealing, the rooks were cawing over the tree-tops, the room was sweet with roses and heliotrope, a great marble basket of hothouse flowers was in the centre of the table. I wondered why Basil looked at it all so gravely? Was he thinking of the bare pavilion? Of the cottage-room at Highgate? Of those midnight wanderings in Holloway? Of the parlour behind the shop? And now of the goodly heritage that was his? As I looked at him questioningly, a flash of his eyes answered me, and then I knew I was right.

As soon as coffee had been served, Basil went up to his mother's room, and I accompanied him to look at Reggie, who was sleeping in his father's room. I found he had taken the cat to bed with him—a large snow-white Persian, who went by the name of Peter. They both looked so comfortable that I had not the heart to disturb them.

The summer twilight had closed in, and on my return to the drawing-room I found that Reynolds had already lighted the hanging lamp, and the soft, warm light just irradiated the centre of the room. Mr. Fleming was standing under it with a book in his hand. At that moment I was conscious of a strange shock, a curious revulsion of feeling; a scene out of the long-closed past started up before me. Eight-and-twenty years ago he had stood just in that spot, when they had sent me in to bid him farewell! The swinging lamp, with its pink shade, was casting just the same glow over him, only it was early spring, and the room was

full of warm firelight. Should I ever forget that evening? and how, when that miserable interview was over, he put me from him when, in my girlish passion, I would have clung to him?

'It is the will of God, Catherine,' he said gently, and then he left me.

As these thoughts flashed through my mind, Mr. Fleming raised his eyes and looked at me fixedly. I knew then the same recollection had occurred to him. He placed a chair for me, and stood beside me a moment.

'I can read your thoughts,' he said very quietly. 'You are remembering what neither of us can ever forget. It is better to speak of it frankly—it is useless to try and ignore it. Yes, it was here, in this room, that I passed the bitterest moments of my life. When I closed that door behind me I knew I was closing it on my hopes of earthly happiness.'

I could not control my voice sufficiently to answer him. He was standing just behind me, and it seemed to me as though it were the young Robert Fleming who was speaking.

'It took all my strength to give you up. I remember you made it very hard for me to leave you. Ah, well! we are middle-aged people now; we can bear to look back on the past pain. Time is a marvellous healer—is it not, Catherine?'

'Why have you never come to see me?' That question would rise to my lips in spite of myself. 'All these years your old friend has been forgotten.'

'You do not believe what you say,' he returned calmly, as he took the seat beside me. 'You have never been forgotten by me. No, I have not come—that is true; I had my reasons. But, all the same, I have seen you from time to time; I have assured myself that you were well and happy.'

'Mr. Fleming! what can you mean?'

'Forgive me if I do not answer you; a man must keep his own counsel sometimes. I have not seen you for years; the last time, I think, it was at St. Mark's.'

'You knew me! you recognised me!' but I was too much abashed to say any more. I felt myself blush like a girl—I, the middle-aged woman!

'I should know you anywhere;' and there was unmistakable tenderness in his voice. 'I preached well that night; I felt inspired, lifted out of myself, to know you were there listening to me. I wanted to speak to you, to tell you how grateful I was, but when I came into the church you had gone.'

'You could not be sure it was I,' I stammered. 'I had a thick veil.'

'If I had needed proof, it was given me. Do you remember this?'

He took out of his pocket a tiny prayer-book that looked very much the worse for wear; it was bound in Russian leather, and on the fly-leaf was written 'Catherine Sefton.'

'Why did you keep this?' I asked, as he took it out of my hand.

'Could I embarrass you by returning it?' was the answer; but I knew he was not telling me the real reason. I saw that by the conscious look on his face. 'I have had it so long that I may as well keep it;' and he put it back in his pocket with a fine air of indifference.

'Your visit cheered me immensely,' he went on. 'I knew then that I had a friend and well-wisher as well as St. Mark's;' and as I started and again a painful flush suffused my face, he said very earnestly: 'Do you think I did not recognise our Lady Bountiful?—that I did not bless you in my heart as I expended those generous sums of money? If you only knew what a happiness it has been to act as your almoner! I felt then as though you and I were still working together.'

You and I! Oh, how cautious he was! But he had called me Catherine once.

'But, all the same, you never cared to come and see me.'

'I thought it better not'—in a low voice. 'Sometimes I used to wonder that you never married. Do you know you have refused a friend of mine—Beauchamp? But he comforted himself by taking a wife some ten years ago. I remember his coming to me and telling me of his disappointment. He was a capital fellow.'

'You have not married, either.'

'I have never cared to do so;' but I fancy he looked reproachfully at me, as though I might have left that unsaid. 'I had Basil, you see; I made him my chief interest in life.'

'You must have been lonely when he left you.'

'Yes, I was pretty lonely; I had got so used to him, I could tell the lad anything. It was a bad business for me when his wife manifested that strange jealousy of his friends—it separated us entirely: Basil begged me to keep away. If I had had any idea of the real cause of his misery I would not have obeyed him, but I never knew until a few weeks ago.'

'It was wrong of Basil not to tell you.'

'He could not bear for me to know; but, of course, it was a mistake. Never mind, I am not his only friend now: he has you and his mother to stand by him.'

We talked a little more on this subject—about Basil's meeting with his mother. He wanted to hear all about it; and when I had satisfied him, he said quietly :

'Never mind Basil now; you have told me all I wished to know; I shall hear the rest from himself. I want to know something on another subject. Will you tell me about yourself, and your sister, and the life you have led all these years? You do not know how much it will interest me.'

This was said so simply and kindly, and with such an air of friendliness, that my troubled consciousness was soothed at once. The next minute I found myself talking to him as though he were my brother; and there was so much to tell—the tragedy of Virginia's home-coming—her despair and remorse—my father's death—and our solitary life in the old Hall. I described Virginia's strange seclusion—her morbid fits—the grief that threatened to prey upon her life. He looked at me anxiously.

'I had no idea of this—at least, I had not realised it; it must have tried you sadly—such a life!'

'I would not let it try me,' I returned quickly, for I did not wish him to pity me too much. It had been in his power to help me, and his foolish man's pride had kept him away. After all, men, even the best of them, are such cowards. 'I had plenty of work: I had Basil's property to manage; I became a woman of business; sometimes I went into society; now and then I entertained at the Hall—but that was dreary work without Virginia. By and by I had Olga to help me; I never felt dull when that dear child was with me.'

'Olga?—that is the young lady with the pretty voice. Yes, I liked the look of her; she has a sweet face.'

'Her nature is sweeter still; every one loves Olga;' and then I stopped, for at that moment Basil came into the room.

He looked surprised to see me there.

'It is very late; I thought you would have retired long ago, Aunt Catherine. I was obliged to remind my mother of the time. What a long day it has been!' rather wearily. 'I think I must bid you good-night now.'

'You are very tired, Basil!'

He gave me a queer glance.

'I think this day has been three days rolled in one—it has seemed endless. I suppose if we measured time by our feelings, I should have lived a month since I got up this morning. Good-night, Aunt Catherine;' and then, for the first time, he kissed me—he seemed to do it naturally.

'Poor lad! he is quite worn out,' observed Mr. Fleming.

'People who do not know Basil would not give him credit for such deep feelings ; but you and I know him better.'

'Yes, indeed. Good-night, Mr. Fleming.'

'Good-night'—and, detaining me a moment : 'Thank you for all you have told me this evening ; after all, we are old friends, Catherine.'

'I hope so.'

'And friends for life, too. Some folk think very lightly of friendship ; but you and I are different sort of people. All these years I have called you my friend.'

'I am glad of that,' I returned soberly.

When I entered my room, with the candle still in my hand, I walked up to the pier-glass and gravely regarded myself from head to foot.

What did I see ? A quiet, well-preserved gentlewoman, in a gray satin dress, with a figure that had not yet lost its girlish roundness, and brown hair, with here and there a thread of shining silver.

'So this is Robert Fleming's friend,' I said to myself—'his friend for life.'

But as I looked a sudden mist seemed to obscure the view ; and as I turned away a great cloud of sadness seemed to envelop me, for I knew that I could not strip myself of my riches, and that they, and they alone, divided me from the tenderest and most faithful heart that ever beat in this world !

CHAPTER XXXI

‘THEY ASKED FOR THE SQUIRE’

‘You are shy and proud, like Englishmen.’

TENNYSON.

‘God’s goodness has been great to thee ;
Let never day nor night unhallow’d pass,
But still remember what the Lord hath done.’

Second Part of Henry VI.

JUST then there was a knock at the door, and Marsden entered ; the honest creature had come to unburden her heart of a little of its gladness. She was warmly attached to her mistress ; with the exception of myself, no one understood Virginia so well. I used to marvel at her patience when Virginia was in one of her trying moods.

‘This is a happy day, ma’am,’ she began ; ‘I never thought to see my mistress look as she does to-day. I could cry as I think of it, and of our fine young Squire who has come to his own.’

‘I was sure of your sympathy with us, Marsden. I have been talking to Mrs. Larkins and Bennett, and they both say how pleased all the servants seem with the look of their new master. My sister has reason to be proud of such a son.’

‘Oh, poor thing ! and she is proud ! She will just lie awake until morning thinking of him, and how he is sleeping under her roof to-night. It has been a trial for him, poor young gentleman ! I will not deny that, meeting his mother for the first time as a full-grown man ; but no one could have behaved better. “He has been goodness itself to me”—that was what she said to me just now.’

‘Marsden, I want to ask you something, and there has been no opportunity. How did my sister take the news ?’

‘Do you mean when your letter came, ma’am, two days ago ? Well, I was in my mistress’s room, just attending to the flowers.

I had given her the letter, and was thinking no more about it, when she suddenly called out, and I thought she was going to faint. One hears sometimes of folks who have died from a sudden joy that was too much for them, and I seemed to understand it when I looked at my mistress's white face.'

'Oh no !' I exclaimed, shocked at the bare idea ; 'I had prepared her so carefully in the previous letter.'

'All the same, it was too much for her. She seemed as though she were paralysed at first ; her poor hands shook so she could not hold the paper. I had to read the letter to her from beginning to end, and when I had finished she made me begin all over again ; it did not seem as though she could take it in.'

'I wished afterwards that I had asked you to telegraph to St. Croix ; I so dreaded the effect on her.'

'Well, after a bit she got calmer, and I gave her her composing-draught ; and then she begged me to leave her alone for an hour. I was almost afraid to do it, seeing her so weak and upset ; but she was very peremptory with me. I stood at the door for the best part of the time, and it was hardly on the stroke of the hour when I went back to her ; and what do you think were her first words, ma'am ?' and now there was a broad smile on Marsden's face.

'It is no use my trying to guess, Marsden.'

'No, ma'am ; and I assure you I could hardly believe my ears : "What am I to wear, Marsden, when I receive my son ?" and looking at me as anxious, too, as though the three kingdoms depended on my answer.'

'How unlike Virginia !' I murmured.

'It was the first time I ever heard such a speech from my mistress's lips, and I have lived close upon four-and-twenty years with her ; and it put me in a nice pucker. There was only that old black velvet that had been put away in lavender for the last twelve years, and Rollston and I had a world of trouble remodelling it and making it fit to wear.' Rollston was our upper housemaid, who had always acted as my maid, for I was too independent in my habits to need a maid of my own.

'It really looked very well.'

'It did at a pinch ; but my mistress, bless her dear heart ! grumbled a good deal over it. This is really what I have come to consult you about ; for last night my mistress said to me, "You must renovate my wardrobe. I must have some handsome dresses ; I do not wish my son to be ashamed of his mother's appearance. You and my sister can talk over it, and then you can get me anything you and she think will be suitable." It was a bit vague,

was it not, ma'am? but, there! my mistress is as unpractical in such matters as a child.'

'Never mind, Marsden; you and I will put our heads together. Let me see, if you will come to my room half an hour before luncheon to-morrow we will arrange it. There must be a new velvet dress; I have made up my mind to that already—Mr. Basil has a fancy for velvet; and then, perhaps, a satin, and a rich black silk with jet trimmings—we will settle all that later on. I shall probably go to town in a day or two, and can call on the dressmaker—Hobart Place is only a step from Victoria.'

'That will be best. Now I must not keep you up any longer, ma'am,' and Marsden withdrew with a satisfied expression on her comely face.

The next morning, as I was finishing dressing, I heard Nix bark, and, looking out of my window, I saw Reggie, in his white sailor suit, running down one of the garden paths, with the pug waddling after him. The next moment the window next mine was thrown up, and 'Wait for me, old chap!' followed in Basil's voice. Reggie stopped at once, and planted his legs sturdily, as though nothing would induce him to move, while Nix ambled round him, heaving his fat little body and jingling his bells, with his foolish little tail curled up tightly after the manner of well-bred pugs.

I stood watching them until Basil came out of the house. The gray suit and little gray cap reminded me of *La Maissonnette* and the pavilion. It was always a pretty sight to see Reggie with his father. I liked the way in which Basil snatched him up, and, thinking himself unperceived, kissed him again and again before he hoisted him on his shoulder and marched off with him. They were going to see the peacocks, and the honeysuckle arbour, and Reggie's new garden. I knew how Basil would enjoy showing him all the sights. I am sorry to say that Reggie spoke of the peacocks in the most disrespectful way afterwards:

'Them ridiculous birds, what has trains like ladies,' he observed.

Basil seemed in excellent spirits at breakfast-time, and when afterwards I volunteered to show him the house, he consented on the condition that Reggie came too. This impeded our movements a little, as Reggie, who had developed a strong attachment to Peter, insisted on toiling after us with the huge creature tucked under his arm, until he was red in the face. I am not quite sure that Peter liked it—he was a cat of dignity; he escaped just as we were entering the Lady Gwendoline's Room, as it was still called; and I saw him licking himself on the window-seat in rather an irritable and injured manner.

'Do you think Aline would like this room?' I asked presently;

'it is a very pleasant room, and with a little fresh cretonne, and a comfortable chair or two, it would make quite a pretty boudoir. And it is so quiet, too; your apartments would be quite shut off from the rest of the house.'

'Where would Reggie sleep?' he asked rather anxiously. 'The nursery is too far away; I must have him near me.'

'He could sleep in your dressing-room, if you like; there is plenty of space. Yes, perhaps that is best. But, Basil, you have not answered me yet. Do you think Aline will like this room?'

'She would be hard to please if she did not. It is a very handsome room; those carved cabinets are beautiful. Has no one ever used it?'

'Not in my time. Virginia always preferred a front room, and hitherto I have sat in the library. I have always had so much writing to do, and it was more convenient for the tenants and servants; but, of course, that will be your room now.'

'But why need I banish you?' with a tinge of impatience in his tone; 'the library would hold a dozen people comfortably. Look here, Aunt Catherine, if I am to be master, I mean you to be mistress. You have got to coach me up in my duties, so we may as well begin to work together from the first.'

'But, my dear——'

'There is no "but" in the matter. I intend to keep things as much as possible on their former footing. I suppose Aline must sit at the top of her own table; but I don't mean to make any other change. You talked a lot of rubbish at St. Croix about the Dower House, as you called it—as though I should allow my mother, in her delicate state of health, to go into that mouldy, fusty, disused wing. Why, the whole place smelt like a vault!'

'It has been so long shut up,' I returned—'ever since my grandmother's time. She and her two daughters inhabited that wing when my father married; I showed you their portraits in the billiard-room; they were your great-aunts, Alicia and Penelope. Of course, it must be thoroughly aired, and a great deal of painting and whitewashing will be necessary before the rooms can be used.'

'Perhaps so; but, as I do not intend to have them used, we may leave all that alone. My mother will remain in her own comfortable apartments; and as for you, if you are too proud or too unsocial to share the library with me, you might take possession of that pretty little morning-room downstairs;' and he so evidently meant what he said, and was so bent on his own way, that I dared not say another word; and, after all, the Lady Gwendoline's Room was most fit for Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst.

Reynolds came up just then, to tell us that Miss Olga and the

two Mr. Leighs were talking to Mr. Fleming in the drawing-room. 'They asked for the Squire, and for you, ma'am.'

Basil coloured a little, perhaps at the word 'Squire.'

'We must not keep our first visitors waiting, must we, Aunt Catherine?' he said, and hurried me downstairs.

I knew how kindly Mr. Leigh would greet Basil—he had such a good heart! He wrung my hand in quite a feeling way as he congratulated me. 'I never was so surprised in my life,' he said; 'and I need not tell you how glad I am, both for you and Mrs. Lyndhurst!' and actually his spectacles were so moist that he had to take them off to wipe them. I am sure he shook hands three times with Basil. His own regret seemed to be that his wife had not been able to come with him that morning.

Jem, too, behaved very well. He was a little grave, perhaps a trifle distant, in his manner to Basil; but he was quite his old affectionate self with me; only he persisted in calling me Miss Sefton.

'But, Jem,' I protested, 'I like Aunt Catherine ever so much better.'

'I cannot help that,' with an accession of gravity; 'it would not be good taste now, when you have a real nephew.'

'But Basil will not mind.'

'I should not think of asking him,' rather stiffly. 'I have been talking to Olga, and begging her to give it up too; but girls are so self-opinionated; she won't hear of calling you Miss Sefton.'

'I should think not!' indignantly. 'Olga is the last one to hurt my feelings.'

'Do you mean that you will be hurt?' and it was evident Jem's soft heart was relenting; unfortunately, at that moment Basil called me.

'Aunt Catherine, are we engaged for Saturday? is that the day we are going up to town? Mr. Leigh wants us to dine with him.'

I saw directly that Basil wished to accept the invitation, so I told him Monday would do very nicely for our expedition. Jem caught at my arm.

'Don't you understand how ridiculous it would be for me?' he said in a low voice; 'perhaps it does not matter for Olga; but for me——'

'Well—well, do as you like, my dear.'

But I was just a trifle hurt with Jem. He need not have made the difference in such a hurry. It looked—it certainly looked as though he were jealous of Basil. So, though he said a great many nice things to me, and made the most friendly overtures to Reggie—whom he pronounced a 'jolly little chap'—I somehow felt as

though Jem were not quite a success. I hinted this to Olga, when all the gentlemen had betaken themselves to the stables—a part of the establishment Basil had not yet visited. We were waiting for Marsden, who had not yet finished dressing her mistress. Virginia's sleepless night had prevented her rising at her usual time. I thought Olga looked rather uncomfortable as I spoke.

'I am sure he is prejudiced against Basil.'

'Oh, I hope not! I trust not!' looking quite pained at the idea; 'but Jem, dear old fellow! has his peculiarities. He is a regular Briton, Aunt Catherine. He prides himself upon always being straightforward and above-board, as he calls it, and, as you know, he does so hate mysteries.'

'That is so foolish of Jem.'

'He will have it Mr. Basil is mysterious. You know how Jem will ask questions. I am sure he must have asked me at least five hundred last night! he will say over and over again that Mr. Basil ought to have told us about his wife from the very first. "By your own account you took him for a widower," he said very severely; "well, no fellow has any right to let a woman think that of him." It was very tiresome and wrong of Jem, and great nonsense too, for of course he gave us no right to suppose such a thing; and why need he tell his family affairs to strangers?'

'I am glad you defended him, Olga.'

'Of course I defended him. I got quite angry with Jem at last. Hubert and Kitty were far nicer, as I told him. Oh, Aunt Catherine, I am sure you will be shocked when you see Kitty!'

'Is she so unwell?'

'She is more than that; she looks absolutely ill, and she has grown much thinner. Hubert does not see it a bit; when I spoke to him, he only said the heat had tired her, and that it was a mistake their going to Lowestoft; the place had not suited her.'

'Poor little woman! I must try and find time to see her this afternoon.'

'Oh, she sent you a message. I was to tell you how rejoiced she was to hear about Mr. Basil; she really cried when she talked about it, and she was so pleased to see me, and so were the children. I have only just come home in time to see Hugh. Hubert takes him to school to-morrow.'

'And the twins, and Wilfred, and little Florence?'

'Oh, they are all as well as possible! Mab has certainly grown, and looks so pretty. Do you know, though I had got them all round me, I missed Reggie. Oh, here comes Marsden at last, and I must leave you to your business!'

I could not prevail on Olga to stay to luncheon.

Kitty was not well enough to be left, she said; and she knew Hubert and Jem would both like to remain.

I think the stables had thawed Jem; he was far more conversational on his return. Basil seemed to like him; but I noticed neither of them mentioned Oxford. After luncheon Jem started for a long walk with Mr. Fleming. Basil went up to sit with his mother, and Mr. Leigh took me across to Fircroft. I found Mrs. Leigh lying on a couch at the open window in the drawing-room. Olga was sitting by her, working. She certainly looked very weak and fragile. I noticed her cheek-bones were slightly prominent, and her eyes were larger and brighter. She was always a pretty little woman, though of late years she had had a worn, faded look. She greeted me most affectionately, and made me sit down beside her.

'I am so glad, dear Miss Sefton!' she whispered.

Her husband, who had not heard the whisper, interrupted her.

'Kitty has grown very lazy,' he said, in his cheerful way; 'she makes us all wait on her. I am head-nurse, and Mab and Jessie carry out my orders.'

'Hubert is right; I give them a great deal of trouble,' she returned rather sadly; and it struck me at once that she was depressed about herself.

Mr. Leigh had some parish work, and left us almost immediately; and a few minutes afterwards Harry Vivian came up to the window and challenged Olga to a game of tennis. Harry was a great favourite of mine; we all called him Harry; and, indeed, who could help liking such a bright, cheery young fellow? Long ago I had guessed the poor boy's secret, though I never mentioned the subject to Olga. If he had only been half a dozen years older—but he would never be on the same plane with her: he was only a good-looking boy, and Olga was a woman. I thought she put down her work a little reluctantly; she would rather have stayed with us.

'I am out of practice,' she remarked; 'but I will try one game, if you like. But I mean to walk back with Aunt Catherine.'

Mrs. Leigh looked after them.

'We are all so glad to get Olga back,' she said presently; 'the poor children have missed her so. Do you know, Hubert and I think she looks different, somehow. She is quieter. I noticed it last night, and put it down to the score of fatigue; but to-day she is even quieter. She is generally so full of spirits.'

'I think Jem was a little bit tiresome last night.'

'Do you mean about your nephew? I am afraid we none of us spared Olga. She was very good in answering all our questions. She has grown very pretty; Hubert said so last night.'

'I always thought Olga pretty.'

'Well, not exactly; it is more her expression,' returned Mrs. Leigh. 'Her features are not at all regular; but until last night I never thought her the least pretty.'

'Well, perhaps not. After all, pretty would apply to a doll. There is something better than mere prettiness in Olga's face.'

'I often wonder if she will marry,' she continued thoughtfully. 'I think she will. Hubert and I talk of it sometimes.'

'Of course she will marry!' quite indignantly; for the idea of my sweet Olga being an old maid was repellent to me. What, was she to go through life and never meet her other self?

'She has never liked any one yet; I am sure of that. Olga is not like other girls. She would ask a great deal from the man she loved.'

As she spoke an odd thought flashed through me—a curiously painful thought. If Basil had been free, would he have cared for Olga? Would Olga have cared for him? I changed the subject hastily by questioning Mrs. Leigh about her health.

'If I were you,' I said seriously, 'I would consult a physician. Dr. Langham is very clever; but it is always more satisfactory to have a second opinion.'

'I wish you would tell Hubert so,' she returned anxiously; 'he thinks so much of what you say. I have never liked to propose it to him, for fear of frightening him. I am certainly not gaining ground this summer.'

'I wonder Mr. Leigh does not see that for himself.'

'Oh no! He will have it that it is only Lowestoft, and I shall soon get stronger. He was quite angry one day when I told him that I felt much weaker. He thinks it is my fancy'—and now there were tears in her eyes—'and that I do not make sufficient effort. I went out to pay some calls with him last week, and when I got home I fainted.'

'Mrs. Leigh, you must certainly speak to a physician at once. It would be the truest kindness to your husband; never mind if he thinks you fanciful.'

'I believe you are right. I wish I were not so cowardly with Hubert. I do so hate worrying him. If you knew how good he is to me!'

'I think every one knows Mr. Leigh's devotion to his wife.' She blushed very prettily.

'If I could only be well enough to help him as I used! it is such a trial having to lie here and do nothing. That is why I am so glad Olga has come back, because he will miss me less. She has always been such a comfort to us.'

We had a little more talk, and before I left Mrs. Leigh promised that she would ask her husband to take her up to London. I was not at all easy in my mind about her; her mother had died of decline, and one or two of her aunts. There was a wasted look about her, and her hand was so thin and light that it gave me a shock to touch it. Olga had finished her game, and she joined me at once. Her first question was about her sister-in-law—did I not think she looked ill?

'Very ill,' was my reply; and then I told her the piece of advice I had given. She seemed relieved to hear it.

'She shall go at once; that is a good idea, Aunt Catherine. I wish Kitty were not so afraid of telling Hubert things. In my opinion, husbands and wives ought to be perfectly frank with each other; but I daresay you will tell me I am not a good judge'—with a little laugh. 'But, then, Hubert is such a slow, stupid, dear old fellow; he never notices things as other people do.'

'I don't know that,' was my unlucky response, but I repented the words as soon as I had spoken them. 'He told Mrs. Leigh that you were somehow different, and so much quieter, and she said the same.'

'Oh no, Aunt Catherine—not really,' in a tone of such distress that I looked at her in surprise. She was quite pale, and her lips were quivering, but she turned off her emotion with a laugh. 'Why, what nonsense! As though a person were never to be tired—and Jem so harassing too! I—I do not think I will come any farther, Aunt Catherine; it would be a pity to interrupt them—would it not?'

We were just by our gate as she spoke, and two people were coming slowly towards us. It was Virginia in her lace hood, pacing under the elms, supported by Basil's arm. Reggie was running on before them.

'How happy they look!' whispered Olga, as she left me.

But I did not answer her; I was too much absorbed in that picture. Could I have ever hoped to have seen that sight? Virginia was walking feebly, but her face was upturned. Basil was bending down to speak to her. I was almost sorry that Reggie saw me and pounced on me with a shout.

'I have brought my mother out into the sunshine; there is no tonic like fresh air, I tell her.' Basil still spoke with a sort of shyness and constraint, with something of formality, but the

slight bashfulness sat well on him. 'Are you tired?' looking down at her.

'No, my dear—no; you have such a strong arm, and it seems to support me so;' and then I took Reggie's hand and walked beside them, until the gong summoned us to the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

‘SO YOU HAVE COME BACK!’

‘Why, what’s the matter,
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?’
Much Ado about Nothing.

‘Shy she was, and I thought her cold.’
TENNYSON.

MR. FLEMING left us the next morning. I did not see him alone again, and our few parting words were exchanged in Virginia’s presence. I thought he looked very grave, but he said he should soon see us again, as Basil had made him promise to pay us another flying visit early in November. I missed him sadly that evening; somehow, I felt sure that, as he sat in his lonely room that night, he was missing us too!

We dined at Fircroft on Saturday. On looking back on that evening, I am not quite sure that I regarded it as a success. Basil was not perfectly at his ease. He looked very handsome in evening dress, but he showed his nervousness by being a little stiff. Olga, too, was unusually quiet; it struck me that Jem was keeping vigilant watch over her, and that she was aware of his surveillance. She seemed half afraid to talk to Basil, and her manner showed none of that soft friendliness that was natural to her. Perhaps Basil missed it, for I saw him looking at her once or twice in a puzzled way. Mrs. Leigh had made an effort, and took her usual seat at the dinner-table; I thought she looked far more fit for bed. Her husband seemed overjoyed to see her there.

‘Why, this is like old times, Kitty!’ he said; and all through dinner I could see him at intervals beaming on her through his spectacles.

I never saw a man more devoted to any woman. Mrs. Leigh’s

worn, sensitive face brightened into positive beauty as she caught one of these fond looks.

'She is picking up nicely now,' he said to me in a confidential whisper. 'It is a case of nerves. Kitty was always too finely strung. If she would only make an effort and pull herself together, she would get on.'

Poor Mr. Leigh! I had not the heart to undeceive him. Olga, who had overheard this little speech, looked at me and shrugged her shoulders rather sadly. We were not a very lively party; I think the young men were a little overawed by Basil's stiffness, which most likely they mistook for haughtiness. I was not surprised on our return to hear Basil say that he had not enjoyed himself much. He liked Mr. Leigh exceedingly, and Mrs. Leigh also.

'What a pretty little woman she would be,' he said, 'if she were not quite so thin and unsubstantial-looking! And I like that nice-looking fellow, Vivian: the other two men are sticks.'

'And Jem?'

'Oh, Jem is a bit stand-offish. I don't know quite what to make of him. He seems a nice fellow enough, but he keeps his sister too much in order.'

'He is devoted to her, really.'

'Oh yes, I daresay. Shall I light your candle for you, Aunt Catherine? What a pretty dress that is! You cut them all out this evening.'

But though he smiled in his old manner as he paid me that little compliment, I could see Basil was not in his usual spirits.

Sunday was better. Basil and Reggie and I went to church in the morning, and I felt very happy and grateful. I was sure from Basil's earnest, devout manner that he was grateful too.

After evening service we took Olga back with us. Jem was not at church, and after supper she sang to us all our favourite hymns. Basil was still a little quiet, but Olga seemed more like herself, and the evening passed very pleasantly.

The next morning we took an early train up to town. Basil had to interview his tailor and bootmaker, and I spent a couple of hours in a quiet street leading out of Eaton Square discussing materials and fashions with our dressmaker, Miss L'Estrange. I am quite sure that I never took such interest in my own dresses as I did in Virginia's, and as Miss L'Estrange was quite as interested, I felt we had done a good morning's work when I had finished.

It was nearly two o'clock when Basil and I met for a hasty luncheon. He complained that he had not done half his business, and that he should have to run up to town again in a day or two.

He seemed tired and worn, and gave me such curt answers that I left off questioning him. I knew the approaching interview with his wife was making him gloomy.

There was no time to be lost. So we jumped into a hansom, and drove as quickly as possible to King's Cross. Basil's tongue did not unloose until we were in the train, and then he said rather quickly:

'I do hate myself for being such a coward! If I had not been such a fool, you might have been sitting comfortably in the library at this present moment.'

'But I prefer to be where I am, thank you.'

'Oh, you say that just to make me feel better about things. Of course you never think of yourself, but, all the same, I ought to have thought for you. Why need I have brought you to such a place?' with an air of intense disgust. 'You have never been used to it. I ought to have remembered that.'

'Nonsense,' I returned, laughing. 'I have been in much worse places. Don't trouble about my feelings, Basil; I am only thinking how I can best help you. I want Aline to look on me as her friend. That is why I have come with you—that she may know how ready we are to welcome her.'

But as Basil said no more, and only looked excessively gloomy, I thought it better to be silent too; for there are some moods of unhappy self-consciousness when even the faintest touch of sympathy seems to bruise.

In a few minutes we were walking down the Holloway Road. Basil said we had only a few hundred yards to go. He stalked by my side like the knight of the rueful countenance. I felt rather nervous and depressed myself. I could not help thinking of the weary months our poor boy had spent among these humble surroundings, and of the miles of pavement his restless feet had traversed night after night.

'This is the place,' he said, so abruptly that I started. Before us was a little corner shop, with a fine display of flowery Pekoe and fragrant Bohea in one window, and heaps of plums and currants, ornamented with citron and candied fruits, in the other, and 'George Barton' in gilt letters over the door.

There were no customers in the shop, only a small sandy-haired man, with a shrewd, comical sort of face, looking over a ledger in the little desk. I guessed this was Mr. Barton before Basil went up to him and held out his hand.

'Are you surprised to see me, George!'

'Well, I am a bit,' looking at me rather curiously. 'Allie never told me she expected you. She is in there,' jerking his

head in the direction of the parlour. 'When did you get back, Fleming?'

'When did I arrive in England, do you mean? Last Tuesday; but I couldn't come before—I couldn't really, George,' in a deprecating voice as Mr. Barton looked at him rather sharply. 'I have a lot to tell you—and Aline; we had better go inside. You will be wondering whom I have brought with me. This is my aunt, Miss Sefton.'

The little man ducked to me.

'Your servant, ma'am,' he said civilly; 'I had no idea Fleming had a relative in the world. Go to Allie, there's a good chap, and I'll join you as soon as Smith can take my place—he is only changing a cheque for me—and then you can tell us all your news.'

He spoke so heartily and kindly that he prepossessed me in his favour; but oh, my poor boy! no wonder you ran away from it all.

'Come along, Aunt Catherine,' observed Basil in a low voice, and I followed him into a neat, cheerful little parlour.

Even in that instantaneous glance I saw there were plants in the window, and some nicely-arranged flowers on the small round table. A great black cat was sleeping in a cushioned chair; and some one—Aline, of course—was busy over some white work by the open window. She dropped it as we entered, and looked at us in extreme surprise as she rose; and, good Heavens! what a beautiful face!

'So you have come back, Basil!' she said coldly, and without taking any notice of me. 'I think you might have written to tell us when to expect you.'

'I wanted to surprise you,' he said, with an attempt at playfulness as he kissed her.

I noticed she turned her cheek to him and received his caress reluctantly.

What a grand-looking woman! I thought of Basil's idyllic description of her in the harvest-field, when she had first taken his fancy; and I could not but own that many a man might have lost his heart to her.

She looked older than I expected—older than Basil—and her figure was large and matronly; but the small classical head, with its smooth glossy plaits, was just as he described it to me, and so was the pure, clearly-cut profile. The large, dark eyes had a strange penetrating sadness in them; only the chin and jaw was a little heavy and sullen-looking.

Basil did not seem to notice his chilling reception; perhaps he was too well used to it.

'Don't you wonder who this lady is, Aline?' he asked, with a sort of forced friendliness. 'I am going to give you and George another surprise. I have found some relatives, and this is one of them, my Aunt Catherine—Miss Sefton, I mean.'

'And I have come with Basil to be introduced to his wife,' I interposed hurriedly. 'My dear, I hope you and I will be very good friends in the future.'

But though I took her hand and pressed it kindly she made no sort of response; only a hard look came over her face.

'I suppose Basil has told you so much about me that you are anxious to make my acquaintance,' she said, with a sort of veiled sarcasm. And then, with a complete change of manner, and dropping my hand, 'Where's Reggie, Basil?'

'He is at the Hall—I mean, I haven't brought him. I thought'—rather awkwardly—'you would come and see him instead.'

'You haven't brought him?' and now there was a stormy light in her eyes. 'You have kept him away from me all this time, and now you have left him behind! That is the way you always treat me! But of course Reggie is nothing to me.'

'Come, come; you aren't quarrelling with your chap already, are you, Allie?' observed her brother, who had overheard her last words. 'Fleming says he has a lot to tell us; most likely he has some object in leaving the kid behind. You see,' turning to us, and rubbing his hands apologetically, 'Allie has been missing him pretty badly all this time; it is natural she should have a mother's feelings. I think the better of her for that, so we won't blame her. Give the lady a seat, Fleming, and take one yourself. Allie will be right enough when she knows what you have got to tell her.'

But, as though to contradict this soothing statement, Aline resumed her work without putting another question, leaving Basil to begin his story as best he could. But I saw she listened to every word; and as he mentioned his mother she drew a long breath and looked up at him. He intercepted the glance at once.

'Are you glad I have found my mother, Aline?' he asked gently.

'I don't know; I haven't seen her yet.'—evasively.

'But you might be glad, for my sake,' he persisted; but as she made no answer he went on with his story.

I saw her start and change colour when he mentioned Reggie's illness, though he passed over it very lightly; but she did not interrupt him once, though Mr. Barton kept up a running commentary in a sort of crescendo, which became more shrill as Basil described his home.

'Well, I am jiggered!' was his observation at this point.

I felt the expression needed translation to render it intelligible, and he rubbed up his sandy hair until it seemed to bristle. Mr. Barton's excitement seemed to communicate itself to Aline—she looked less statue-like. After a moment she laid down her work.

'Are squires very rich, Basil?'

'I don't know, my dear,' evidently delighted to find she would speak to him. 'I cannot answer for other squires, but Aunt Catherine tells me I have a large fortune.'

'Oh! you will be happy then,' she said, still looking at him. 'Our poor life has never suited you; you have not been brought up to it, as George and I have. You will get on better with your fine friends.'

'Why, you talk as though I were going to leave you behind! only I know you don't mean it. Aline, you should just see Reggie feeding the peacocks—it is quite a picture! Aunt Catherine is going to order him a velvet suit; just fancy how he will look running over the lawns and gathering the flowers!'

She seemed to listen to him breathlessly—her lips parted—her eyes softened.

'And there is such a beautiful room for you, Aline—they call it the Lady Gwendoline's Room—full of such lovely things; and I shall be able to buy you all you want—silk dresses, furs, lace, anything you fancy—and my mother is keeping some jewellery for you: you were always fond of pretty things.'

'But I am not thinking of them now,' arching her long neck with a gesture of disdain, and looking handsomer than ever. 'I am not a child to be bribed into good behaviour by pretty things; the question is'—and here her voice faltered—'wouldn't you rather have me stop here along with George, than be shaming you before your fine friends?'

There was no mistaking the anxiety with which she waited for his answer.

'Why should you shame me?' he returned impatiently. 'Why should we not begin all over again? We have made a mess of things—I will not deny that. I have not been the best of husbands to you, Aline; and there have been times when you have forgotten yourself. But if you will only make a fresh start, I am willing to overlook the past; a man cannot say more than that.'

Poor Basil! he meant well; but if he had only been a little softer with her! But I suppose he could not help his stern manner.

'I am sure Fleming—I beg his pardon, Lyndhurst—is speaking

fair and proper, Allie ; and there is no call for you to be so stand-offish with him. You are his wife ; remember that.'

'I am not likely to forget it, George,' she returned, with a proud sort of humility. 'No, you cannot say more than that, Basil ; I did not expect to hear you say so much, after the way I have behaved. If you mean what you say, and you are willing to have me to live with you—— But there,' interrupting herself, 'I will make no promises—I have broken too many already—only I will try my best not to disgrace you.'

She held out her hand to him as she spoke ; it was a large well-shaped hand, but showed traces of work. There were tears in her eyes, but I do not think Basil saw them.

'Then that is settled, my dear,' he said kindly enough ; but I wished he had kissed her—I think she expected it, for she sighed in a disappointed way as she withdrew her hand.

'Come, this is first-rate,' exclaimed Mr. Barton, rubbing up his hair again. 'Allie had always the makings of a lady in her, and I shall be proud and happy to see her in her right place. Not but what I shall miss you,' looking at her wistfully. 'You and me have always been comfortable together, and the place will be a bit dull without you ; but I have no call to think of that. When shall you want her, Lyndhurst ? that is the next question.'

'Had she not better come back with us to-night, Basil ?' I asked. 'There is no need for any preparation.'

I thought Basil seemed disturbed at my question ; but a moment's reflection made him think better of it.

'Yes, why not ? You have not much packing to do, have you, Aline ? You might put up a few things, and let George send the rest ; besides, I can get you all you want.'

'To-night ?—come back with you to-night ?' and Aline certainly looked frightened ; but her brother gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

'You had better strike when the iron's hot ; there is nothing like getting a thing over. Yes—yes ; go with your husband, Allie, and be a good girl, and he'll be proud of you yet.'

'Can I help you, my dear ?' I said in a low voice ; but she shook her head.

'There is not much to do, and Becky is used to help me. Basil,' rather timidly, 'would not Miss Sefton like some tea ? The kettle must be boiling by now.'

'That's an excellent idea !' interposed her brother, without waiting for Basil to answer ; 'I guess we are all pretty dry, talking so long. Just you hurry up Becky, there's a good lass. Why,' with a laugh of intense enjoyment, 'to think of my ordering about

the Squire's lady in this fashion! but you will look over it, Allie, won't you?

'I wish you would not talk such nonsense!' she returned rather crossly, as she left the room. Certainly Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst had not the most angelic temper in the world; but when she returned, a few minutes later, all traces of sullenness had vanished. I watched her with pleasure as she helped the rough maid-of-all-work to set the table. All her movements were slow, but graceful. She did not seem conscious of my observation; but more than once I saw her raise her dark eyes, and fix them on Basil in a curiously searching manner; but she scarcely spoke as she poured out the tea, except to ask her brother once to pass the tea-cake to me.

Directly tea was over she went upstairs, and, after a few minutes, Basil followed her. I think he wanted to give her a hint or two about her dress. The moment we were left alone, Mr. Barton edged his chair a little nearer to me in a confidential manner.

'I am more glad than I can say, ma'am,' he began respectfully, 'to see that there is a chance of those two coming to a better understanding. I don't mean to blame one more than another. Allie has given Fleming a lot to bear; but if he had only been a little more patient with her!'

'Has she—has Aline been going on better lately?'

'Oh, I see you know all about it,' frowning anxiously. 'I suppose Fleming—bah! I can't get used to the new name—Lyndhurst, I mean—has told you? Yes, it is a bad job for both of them—these breaks-out of Allie's; but she has not had one for months. I do believe she is ever so much better, poor girl! She struggles and prays against her temptation; but at times it seems as though the devil were too strong for her. Her mother died of it, you see—not that Allie knows that—that makes me not quite so hard on her.'

'But can nothing be done?'

'You must never let her taste anything stronger than tea or coffee,' he returned earnestly. 'Why, I never touch a drop of beer even before her. Keep her amused and happy, and give her a word of praise now and then, just to let her see you are pleased with her, and you will soon see what Allie is. She has done a deal of fretting lately after Fleming and the boy; it is a sore point with her, that neither of them needs her. I was fearful that she would go wrong with brooding over it; but no, she has kept herself straight.'

'I am afraid you will miss her, Mr. Barton?'

'Well, ma'am,' in an odd, choked voice, 'you are right about

that. Allie is just the apple of my eye. She has been my girl, you see, ever since father and mother died, and I won't deny it will be a bit dull for me ; though, as her husband has the best right to her, I am not going to complain as long as he makes her happy.'

'Do you think she wishes to come with us?'

'That is a difficult question, ma'am. She is sickening for a sight of the child, and she is proud of being invited so kindly by her husband ; but, in her heart, I expect Allie is mortally afraid. It is going among strangers, you see ; and then she has never been used to grandeur ; it will be kind of queer to her, having a livery servant to stand behind her chair.'

'Oh, she will soon get used to that.'

'If you would only be her friend, and teach her what to do !' he went on, looking at me so wistfully that I was quite touched. 'You see, Allie has never had a woman friend, and Becky, though she is invaluable, has been a bit rough with her. Now, a lady like yourself will be different, and if you can only get an influence over my poor girl——!'

'I will try my best—I will indeed, Mr. Barton ; and my sister will be good to her, too.'

'Thank you kindly. Then I will not fash myself overmuch. You will not be expecting too much of the lass? Allie is no talker ; even with me she is mostly silent ; but she knows how to make a house comfortable.'

'I am glad to know that.'

'Why, she has the cleverest fingers in the world !' warming into animation. 'You should just see the set of shirts she has made for me ! You would not wish to see better work. And she is industrious, too—never a moment idle, except when she is in one of her bad states, and then she will sit and do nothing for the hour together. Why, the cakes and pies she makes would astonish you ! And she keeps the place as tidy as a new pin. Miss her !'—rather grumpily—'ay, and Becky will miss her, too, for all the trouble she gives both of us when she is in her tantrums.'

We were interrupted at this moment, for Basil came back, and a few minutes afterwards Aline followed him. She was dressed for walking, and looked very nice. There was no fault to be found in the gray gown, and hat bound with a darker shade of gray velvet. I thought from her appearance that she had been crying.

'You have not been long getting ready, Allie.'

'No,' she said quietly, as she buttoned her gloves ; 'I had not much to do. Basil would hardly let me take anything. He says my clothes are not grand enough for Brookfield Hall, and that he

must buy everything fresh, so I have only got my blue cashmere besides this.'

'Never mind, my dear,' I interposed cheerfully; 'you and I will come up to town and order all you require.'

'Shall I be able to come and see George too?' she asked anxiously.

'Now, you are not going to trouble your head about me,' returned her brother affectionately. 'Becky and I will do first-rate together; shan't we, Becky?' as she stood in the doorway, looking on rather grimly. 'There! you are ready now, so give us a kiss, and don't keep Fleming waiting.'

'I don't half like leaving you, George,' she said, putting up her face to be kissed. 'No one is half so good to me as you are. I doubt but I shall repent it.'

'Come, you might have paid me a prettier compliment,' observed Basil good-humouredly. 'Good-bye, George! I will bring Aline back to see you.'

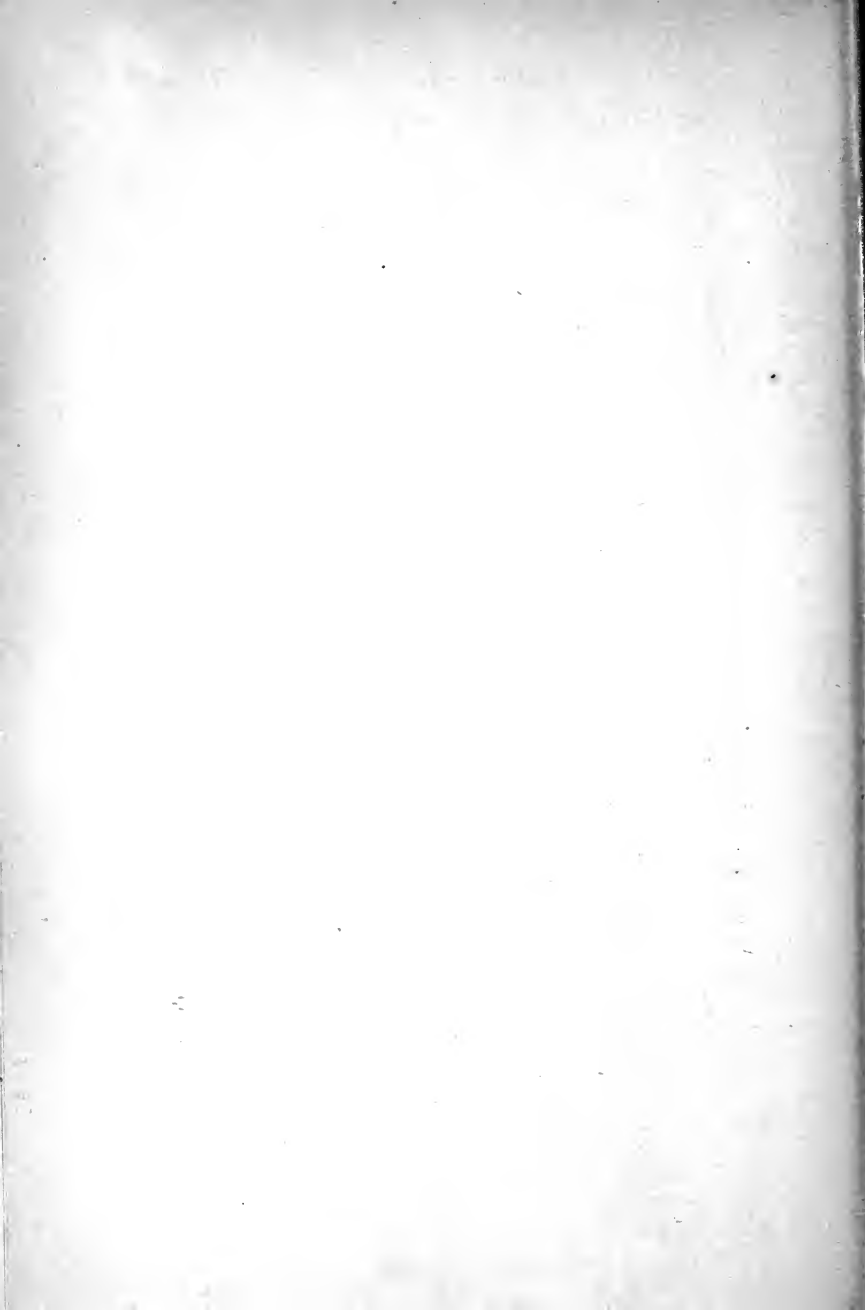
He took hold of her arm, and hurried her away, as though he dreaded a longer leave-taking.

Mr. Barton followed us to the door of the shop, and watched us disconsolately as we seated ourselves in the cab Becky had procured. As we drove off, Aline leaned forward and waved her hand to him.

'Good-bye, dear old George!' she said unsteadily; and a great tear rolled down her cheek. 'Are you sure you will take me to see him, Basil?'

'Quite sure, my dear!'

'Yes; but he will not be welcome at Brookfield Hall. George will never come and see me there,' she added sorrowfully; and to this Basil made no answer.



OLGA RESUMES HER STORY



CHAPTER XXXIII

JEM GIVES HIS OPINION

‘Thou art in a parlous state, shepherd.’
As You Like It.

‘I know the gentleman
To be of worth, and worthy estimation,
And not without desert so well reputed.’
Two Gentlemen of Verona.

I WISH Aunt Catherine had not repeated Hubert’s speech ; somehow it gave me an uncomfortable feeling for days !

It was so unlike Hubert to notice if one were a little quieter, or if one talked less ; so it must have been Kitty who put it into his head. He had a way of repeating her speeches at times, but I had never minded it before. Was there any truth in the accusation ? For the first time in my life I shrank from questioning myself too closely. Perhaps my holiday had spoilt me and unfitted me for the monotonous routine of home-life, but certainly Fireroft had never seemed so dull to me before, and, worst of all, Jem was disappointing me.

It was impossible to deny that Jem was in a most captious, fault-finding humour ; indeed, there was no pleasing him ; he grumbled if I mentioned St. Croix, and seemed to take no interest in anything I told him ; and yet if I were silent, he would ask me quite crossly what I was thinking about, as though my silence irritated him ; indeed, I never knew the dear fellow so utterly perverse. I am sure Harry felt for me, though his loyalty to Jem would not allow him to say so ; but he gave me a sympathising glance now and then, as though to beg me not to mind ; but somehow I did mind very much indeed, and more than once I had a quiet cry when I went to my room at night, for if Jem were not pleased with me, my whole world seemed out of gear.

He damped my enjoyment completely the evening Aunt Catherine and Mr. Basil dined at Fircroft. He seemed to listen to every word Mr. Basil said to me, and if I laughed or repeated any of our old St. Croix jokes, he frowned and seemed quite annoyed. I left off talking at last, and gave all my attention to Harry, who took it quite gratefully.

Mr. Basil was certainly not at his ease; he was dignified, and rather stiff and formal. I never found out before how handsome he was, and for the first time I saw a likeness to his mother—the only time he smiled naturally was when I told him this; he quite blushed with pleasure—at least, he grew red.

‘I am so glad you can see it,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I think my mother perfectly lovely;’ and then I saw Jem scowling at me, and I left Mr. Basil and went to the piano.

Jem was not more amiable the next day. He grumbled a good deal on his way to the church, and he chose to be exceedingly put out because Aunt Catherine wished me to go back with them to supper after evening service.

‘She might have had the civility to ask me too!’ he said, as we turned into the road; ‘but I suppose the Don objects to me.’

Jem was really too bad. Of course it was all his jealousy of Mr. Basil. I would not take the trouble to ask whom he meant by that contemptuous sobriquet, so I talked to Harry all the way home, and never addressed a single observation to Jem—even a worm will turn; and I was growing tired of Jem’s ill-humour!

Jem refused to go to church with me in the evening. He dragged off Harry for a long walk, so I went with Mab and Jessie. The Hall pew was nearly opposite the Vicarage pew. I could not help noticing how grave and abstracted Mr. Basil looked; I had no intention of watching him, only his fixed, stern expression riveted me for the moment, as I glanced at him; he suddenly looked up, and our eyes met. I felt somewhat confused, and all the rest of the service I could not help thinking what that singular flashing look meant. We three walked back together in the sweet dewy evening.

Mrs. Lyndhurst was waiting for us in the drawing-room. She wore her velvet dress, and a pretty little lace cap, and I understood then why Mr. Basil thought her lovely. She had always been handsomer than Aunt Catherine, and with that soft colour in her face, and that gentle, tremulous smile, she certainly looked very sweet.

After supper I sang to them—I think I never enjoyed singing

more than I did that evening ; there was very little light in the room, and the windows were open. Mr. Basil sat near his mother ; I saw her take his hand once, and kiss it : perhaps the semi-darkness gave her courage, for they were still very shy with each other. Aunt Catherine told me that Mrs. Lyndhurst feared to give him the least caress.

'He is very reserved with her !' she said to me, 'and cannot bring himself to use any filial freedom, and this restrains her ; but when the first strangeness wears off, she will soon see how affectionate Basil can be.'

Jem came to fetch me as usual, but he sent in a message that he was smoking and had Rollo with him, and would wait outside. I fancied Mr. Basil looked disappointed.

'There was no need for your brother to take the trouble ; I could have escorted you,' he said rather formally, but though he attended me to the door, he did not speak to Jem, who was strolling up and down under the trees.

He threw away the end of his cigar as I joined him, and took hold of my arm ; my first words were hardly gracious, however.

'You need not have taken the trouble to fetch me, Jem. You must have been tired with your long walk.'

'I suppose you meant the Don to walk home with you ?' with a return of gruffness ; but I was not in a specially meek mood.

'I wish you would not call people names, Jem. It is not good form.'

'I think it is a capital name, and just fits the person for whom it is intended. Lyndhurst is such a stiff sort of chap. He looks ever so much taller than any one else.'

'What makes you dislike him so ?' I replied in a vexed tone. 'You do nothing but find fault with him. It is hardly kind to Aunt Catherine and Mrs. Lyndhurst, to pick holes in their belongings.'

'I can't help it,' curtly. 'I can get on with most fellows, but Lyndhurst and I don't hit it off somehow.'

'But, Jem, he was so friendly to you at first !'

'Was he ? I can't say I remember that circumstance. I have a notion that we eyed each other like a couple of tom-cats, as though to test our fighting qualities. Look here, Olga, I know you have thought me disagreeable the last day or two, but I can't get over the fact that Lyndhurst and Fleming are the same person, and I hate your having anything to do with him there.'

Jem spoke in the same surly manner ; but somehow I did not

mind it half so much as I had minded his sneering innuendoes ; it was better to have our fight out once for all. Jem evidently thought the same, for, instead of turning into the paddock that led to our kitchen-garden, he continued walking down the road.

‘I am beginning to detest the sight of the fellow!’ he went on, but this was too much for my patience.

‘What right have you to speak so of any one after a three days’ acquaintance?’ I said angrily; ‘you do not know Mr. Basil; with all his faults, I have the greatest respect for him. He is not what you think him; he is a clever man and a gentleman, and his life has been very unhappy. Are you so good and immaculate yourself that you cannot make allowances for a mistake made in youth?’

‘You are meaning his marriage,’ he returned quickly; but I was not thinking of that. ‘Look here, Olga, I have heard a lot of this fellow Fleming—Lyndhurst, I mean. When I was at Oxford, the men told me plenty about him; he did not bear the best of characters with the authorities. He got into a freethinking set, and called himself an Agnostic. There was a row or two in which he was mixed up, and he very nearly got rusticated.’

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ rather rudely.

‘Oh, you don’t—don’t you! I suppose you have got an excellent reason for your incredulity?’ sneered Jem—‘a girl has so much experience of the world and men. Then, too, his marriage was disgraceful.’

‘It was nothing of the kind,’ I retorted. ‘Aunt Catherine told me all about it; she was a beautiful girl, and her friends were most respectable.’

‘Her brother has a shop in Holloway, hasn’t he? and Fleming—confound the two names!—Lyndhurst, I mean—married her on the sly; but of course that was not wrong? You have changed your ideas of morality, I find.’

‘No, Jem; but you used a wrong word; there was nothing disgraceful about Mr. Lyndhurst’s marriage.’

‘Use what word you like, only let me finish. I cannot think what makes you so contradictory to-night. I tell you I don’t approve of Lyndhurst, only you need not repeat all this to Aunt Catherine; she is bound to think the best of her nephew. The part about him I dislike most is his scraping up an acquaintance with you in that outlandish place, and letting you believe he was a widower.’

I was so angry at this that I was nearly overwhelming Jem with my wrath; he should know, for the first time in his life, that I had a temper. I would give him a taste of it that should

be caustic and stringent enough to last him for a month ; but as I turned to him with this amiable intention, I saw him regarding me with such manifest anxiety, with such a troubled expression, that I softened at once.

'I have hardly patience to answer you at all,' I began ; 'but I feel I must defend Mr. Basil. You are very unjust, Jem, and very prejudiced ; it was my own stupidity that made me take him for a widower. I thought, from something Reggie said, that his mother was dead ; but he meant his nurse, so'—stammering a little—'I told Aunt Catherine, and she believed it, too ; but it was all a mistake on our parts, and Mr. Basil very soon undeceived us.'

'All the same, he had no right to be so much with you, and I must say I wonder at Aunt Catherine : she ought to have known that an acquaintance with a suspicious-looking fellow should have been stopped at once.'

'Ah, Jem, how ridiculous you are !' I exclaimed, quite weary of his persistence. 'What could be the harm of exchanging a few civil words with a neighbour ? Mr. Basil never spoke to me unless he was obliged ; indeed, on several occasions I noticed that he avoided me. But when Reggie was ill——'

'Ah, of course, I know how things would be then !' in an exasperated tone. 'Aunt Catherine is too soft-hearted, and, for the matter of that, you know you are a goose yourself, Olga. Well, I don't want to make things worse by putting ideas into your head, but Aunt Catherine was old enough to know that it was not a safe line to take when she had a young lady under her care. I am not saying any harm has come of it, mind you, but, all the same, it has put me all wrong with Lyndhurst.'

Jem was purposely vague in his concluding remarks, which were made in a decidedly apologetic voice. Not for worlds would I have had him suspect that I understood his hints, that they were making me tingle with shame all over. He feared harm might have come of it, how could I avoid understanding him ?—it was a dangerous position for a girl. Poor, dear Jem ! it was only his love and anxiety for me that had made him so gruff and disagreeable, and filled him with such animosity to the young Squire ; my heart relented to this foolish, blundering Jem. I must set his mind at rest.

'Jem,' I said as gently as I could, 'you must put all these foolish ideas out of your head ; they wrong me as well as Mr. Basil—he and I are very good friends. I—I hope he respects me as much as I do him, and from his manner I think it is so ; no one has ever shown me more respect. I would trust him more

than most men. I have never heard a word from his lips that I would have wished unsaid; he is a gentleman, and *noblesse oblige*—and I wish’—and here a spark of temper would show itself—‘I wish you were more like him.’

Jem seemed quite taken aback by this little outburst. It touched him in spite of himself, and he had the rare magnanimity to overlook my parting thrust.

‘Well, perhaps he is not such a bad fellow, after all, and if there is no harm done—’

He was floundering head-foremost into it again, but I caught him up smartly.

‘Harm—what harm should there be?’ But I felt, with a little sinking of heart, that Jem had very nearly hit the truth. ‘I have another friend at the Hall, that is all; and when Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst comes, I hope I shall like her, too.’

I was carrying matters with a high hand. Jem began to look as though he had had enough of it; but he took up my last words:

‘I don’t suppose you will care much for a vulgar, under-bred young woman.’

‘But she is not vulgar—Aunt Catherine told me so. Mr. Basil would never have fallen in love with the sort of person you describe; he is too refined in his tastes. Anyhow, I mean to try and like her, just to help Aunt Catherine, and because—because she is Reggie’s mother;’ and then all of a sudden my throat seemed to swell, and I felt as though I wanted to cry.

Jem gave me a rough little shake.

‘Now don’t be a goose, Olga; I have only meant it for your good. You ought to be glad that I look after you. Many fellows would not take half so much trouble for a sister.’

‘I don’t want you to take that sort of trouble for me. It is very disagreeable, Jem.’

‘Very well, then, I won’t another time, and you may look after yourself.’ Then, relenting at my sad face: ‘Now, be a good girl, and forgive me. Haven’t I a right to take care of the best little sister in the world? I vow I don’t know the fellow who is good enough for her;’ and, charmed with this compliment, I no longer refused to kiss and make friends, as we called it in our childish days, only I do not believe Jem and I had ever quarrelled so seriously before. ‘I had no idea you could be such a spitfire,’ he observed as we strolled on happily, arm-in-arm. ‘Violet Campbell can say a sharp thing or two, but she can’t hold the candle to you.’

To this day I have no idea whether it was Jem’s artful inten-

tion to change the subject, or whether he made this speech quite innocently, and without malice ; but it certainly had the singular effect of driving the Hall folk out of my head in a moment. For, after all, Jem was Jem, and I should like to see the girl who — But never mind that.

‘And who may Violet Campbell be?’ I asked in a tone calculated to strike awe into any bachelor brother’s heart.

‘Oh, she is only a girl I met down at Marlow,’ mumbled Jem. ‘Didn’t I tell you about the water-party? She steered in our boat. She was a nice little thing—not as handsome as Bella Parker and her cousin Nora, but still——’

‘You have a very bad habit, Jem, of calling young ladies by their Christian names. It is bad form, and not at all respectful.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ was the amiable rejoinder to this sisterly rebuke.

‘Did you only see Miss Campbell once?’ I continued, bent on severe cross-examination.

‘She was at the picnic next day in the Quarry Woods, and I met her coming out of church the following Sunday. She was staying with her uncle—he seemed a jolly old boy—but she told me her people live in Kensington.’

‘Indeed.’

‘They are a large family—three or four boys, and as many girls. Vi—I mean Miss Campbell—is the eldest daughter.’

‘She seems to have told you a good deal about herself and her belongings.’

‘Well, one must talk about something if one is with a person for three or four hours,’ replied Jem testily. ‘I daresay you contrived to say a good deal to the Don when he was mooning about in that summer-house of his.’ But here Jem found himself unable to proceed, as I effectually closed his lips. ‘Pax, you ridiculous child! you have half suffocated me.’

‘Jem,’ disregarding this remonstrance, ‘I wish you would tell me a little more about Miss Campbell. She is very pretty, you say?’

‘I said nothing of the kind.’

‘Well, you implied it. You said she was a nice little thing.’

‘So she is, and so are you, when you behave yourself.’

‘Do you mean she is like me?’ brightening up.

‘No, I don’t. You are not half so pretty. I mean she is a different style. She is your height, perhaps a little taller; but there, I never could describe girls. She is awfully easy to get on with, and there is no nonsense about her, and she does not try to flirt with a fellow. One of her brothers—Kit she called him—was in our boat, too. He is coming to Balliol next term.’

'Did she—did he, I mean, ask you to call?'

'Oh, there is plenty of time for that,' replied Jem cheerfully. 'I said something about looking them up when I went to town; but I think I shall wait until I know young Campbell a little better. Vi—I mean Miss Campbell—is coming down to Commemoration next June.'

I was silent. A little further reflection made me swallow this piece of information very quietly. I was quite used to these confidences on Jem's part; there was always some 'awfully nice girl' on the tapis. Not that Jem had ever been really in love, but he was of a genial, sociable temperament, and all girls liked him. He was so full of fun, and he admired them so frankly, the most prudish of them could not take umbrage at his attentions.

Last summer it had been that pretty little Miss Black, and in the winter he had transferred his allegiance to Sybil Grey, and so now if it were Violet Campbell I need not disquiet myself; so I tried not to think that there was a shade more earnestness in Jem's manner, and a greater unwillingness to enter into close particulars.

Nothing could be more foolish than for Jem to lose his heart at his age. Why, he had not left Oxford, and it would be years before he could hope to hold a brief; and with only a hundred and fifty pounds a year of his own, he was certainly not in a position to marry.

One question I did put to Jem as we stood at the door:

'Are the Campbells rich?'

'Rich? I am sure I don't know,' returned Jem, staring at me. 'Mr. Campbell is a solicitor; they live in Addison Road. No; I am certain they are not. I remember Vi—Miss Campbell saying that some of the boys must go into the City, as her father could only afford to send Kit to Oxford. Why do you want to know?'

'Oh, only for information. Jem, there is the prayer-bell, and we must go in.'

Kitty had retired early. As I passed her door I went in to bid her good-night. She was lying awake, and fully expecting me. She looked hot and feverish, and I could tell by her voice that she had been crying. I asked her, with much concern, if she felt less well.

'No,' she returned dejectedly; 'I am only fretting about Hubert. I have been speaking to him about Miss Sefton's proposition; it seems to worry him excessively.'

'Do you mean he begrudges the expense?'

'No, of course not—neither the expense nor trouble. Has Hubert ever begrudged me anything? He will take me up on Thursday; but, all the same, he thinks that I am fanciful, and

wanting in patience. He has told me as much to-night; he gave me quite a sermon after church, about the duty of bearing weakness more cheerfully.'

'How can Hubert be so ridiculous? I begin to lose all patience with him; even Harry said this morning how far less well you seemed, and that he feared you were losing ground daily.'

'You must not be hard on Hubert, dear. I sometimes think he is shutting his eyes purposely, and that he does not want to see it. His manner gives me this impression. Why, he was almost irritable with me this evening; and the end of it was he packed me off to bed, though I told him I never slept now until one or two. It is so dreary lying here just thinking of it all.'

'Never mind. I will stay with you, and then you will not be dull; when people are weak, they get so low-spirited. I think that is the worst of illness.'

'I cannot tell you how glad I am to have you again,' she returned, looking at me affectionately. 'I have missed you so much, and Hubert has had no one to keep him company; and when I am with him, I am too tired and stupid to talk to him or amuse him. Sometimes I have fancied that he thought me cross, and all the time it was only this miserable sinking.'

'Men are so stupid,' I began wrathfully; but at that moment there was a heavy step in the dressing-room, and Hubert, hearing voices, came in to know who was keeping Kitty awake.

'It is only Olga,' said Kitty apologetically; 'she came in to wish me good-night.'

'And has been chattering and disturbing you for the last half-hour,' he remarked severely. 'What will be the use of my taking you to a physician, Kitty, if you refuse to take the slightest care of yourself? Dr. Langham begged you in my hearing to be in bed by ten o'clock, and it is now nearly eleven; and you are not attempting to go to sleep.'

'I thought I told you, Hubert, that it was impossible for me to sleep,' she returned reproachfully.

'Of course it is impossible if you do not try,' he replied decidedly; and seeing him in this authoritative mood, Kitty merely sighed wearily, and gave up the contest by closing her eyes; but that flushed, feverish face did not look like sleep. 'There's a good little woman,' returned Hubert, restored to good humour by this ready obedience; and then he followed me out of the room.

'You meant it kindly, Olga,' he said, as he lighted my candle; 'but Kitty's nerves are in such a state that she cannot be kept too quiet. Rest and sleep and plenty of nourishment—that was

what Dr. Langham ordered, and a very excellent prescription, too ; and what Kitty wants with another physician passes my comprehension. I wish Miss Sefton had minded her own business'—rather crossly.

'I am very glad you have made up your mind to take her,' was my bold reply. 'I don't want to worry you, Hubert, you have trouble enough ; but I think Kitty is worse than you think. It is not only her nerves : there must be some cause for this weakness ; she is very uneasy about herself.'

'Of course she is uneasy if you all talk to her about her health,' he returned doggedly. 'Miss Sefton has put this London doctor in her head, and I shall have no peace until I take her. He will just laugh at us for our pains, and serve us all right, too ; it is a clear case of nerves. She has overtired herself with the children ; and she has never been strong since little Flo was born. I shall have to be more strict with her for the future ;' and so saying he marched off.

Poor Hubert ! as though he could disguise his anxiety from me ! All the time he was arguing about Kitty's nerves, I could see how he was watching me to know if I agreed with him. Kitty was right ; he was blinding himself purposely. I went to bed that night with a heavy heart, for what would Hubert do if Kitty—— But even to myself I could not finish the sentence.

CHAPTER XXXIV

' I DON'T LOOK LIKE A SQUIRE'S LADY '

' Could ye bless him, father—mother,
Bless the dimple in his cheek ?
Dare ye look at one another,
And the benediction speak ?
Would ye not break out in weeping,
And confess yourselves too weak ? '

MRS. BROWNING.

AUNT CATHERINE had begged me to spend the following afternoon with Mrs. Lyndhurst, as she and Mr. Basil would be away the whole day. When the time came, I left Kitty very unwillingly. There had been a return of faintness during the morning. Nurse told me her mistress had not closed her eyes all night ; but she had insisted on getting up at her usual hour to prevent Mr. Leigh from being anxious. I left her lying on the drawing-room couch looking miserably ill and depressed, and Hubert sitting by her with a pile of new magazines he was cutting for her amusement. I could hear him laughing as he explained some amusing picture to her, and Kitty's feeble voice trying to echo him ; but there was not a mirthful note in it.

Mrs. Lyndhurst was sitting in the garden, and Reggie was with her ; and we spent a very happy afternoon. I was so delighted to have my darling to myself again. We played our old games with Rollo, even enacting 'Mrs. Howl in the ivy-bush.' Reggie laughed so excessively that I caught him again and again without difficulty. His only complaint was that there was no swing to rest in—by swing he meant the hammock ; so his grandmother promised to buy him one, and we settled where to hang it.

We had our tea in the old English garden, and Reggie fetched Peter ; and with Rollo, the pug, and the two peacocks, we were a

goodly company. Reggie looked like a lovely little picture as he fed the gorgeous creatures ; and the background of sunflowers was like a golden hedge behind him. Reggie always went to bed early ; and as soon as Marsden had carried him off, we went indoors, as Mrs. Lyndhurst was tired. When Reggie bade her good-night, I noticed how often and how passionately she kissed him. Reggie noticed it too.

‘Why do you kiss me so hard and so many times, Gran?’ he asked, fixing his eyes very seriously on her.

‘The kisses are not all for you, my darling,’ she answered tenderly. ‘I meant them for another little boy, whose mother never gave him any ;’ and then she sighed heavily, and bade him go with Marsden ; and we both knew what she meant, and how even her love for this sweet, engaging little creature was mixed up with unextinguishable remorse that her own child should have missed so much.

I chided her gently for this sadness, but she only shook her head with a melancholy smile.

‘It must be so, Olga. I try not to be morbid ; but the knowledge of all he has lost seems a barrier between us even now. Basil is very generous ; he wants me to forget—he tries to forget himself—but sometimes, when the child is on my lap, I know what Basil thinks, and then I can hardly keep myself from asking his forgiveness over again.’

‘You must never do that ; it would only embarrass him.’

‘No, I must be patient ; he is very dear and good. I have only myself to thank that he cannot be all a son should be to his mother ; he thinks too much before he speaks ; he is too much afraid of hurting me ; he pronounces my name almost timidly ; and the least caress on my part seems to trouble him. If he could only speak to me as he does to Catherine ! Why, he was quite impatient with her this morning because she kept him waiting, and he feared they would lose the train.’

‘And you want him to be impatient with you?’

She could not help smiling at such a question.

‘It almost sounds like it, does it not ? I think I should not mind, if he were only at his ease with me ; in other respects his behaviour is perfect.’

‘But surely you are happy now !’ I remonstrated ; for I had a youthful impatience of this morbid iteration.

‘I am happy when Basil is with me,’ she returned. ‘It is only in the night, when I lie awake, that I think of the lifetime I have lost—all those years—those miserable years ; and he wants me to forget—as though a mother could ever bury the past. Do

you think'—looking at me with a sort of strained eagerness—
'that he will ever love me as he does Catherine?'

'Some day he will love you more.'

'Oh, my dear, how you comfort me! If I could only believe that, I should be happy indeed! How many days has he been with me?—only five; and yet I worship the ground he walks on. But I must not tell him so—oh no, it would not be well——'

'Mrs. Lyndhurst,' I said, checking her, for I found it difficult to sustain the conversation, 'do you think they will be back soon? I meant to have left you an hour ago. Hark! is not that the carriage turning in at the gate?' and I rose in a flurried manner.

Aunt Catherine had not asked me to stay until their return, and they had come back earlier than I expected.

'Never mind; you must stay to dinner now. What does it matter, child? you are one of us,' replied Mrs. Lyndhurst, pressing my arm kindly, as we stood together at the window, looking down the avenue.

Yes, there were the bays, and there was Aunt Catherine waving her hand to us. But who was that lady in the gray hat beside her? The next moment Mrs. Lyndhurst caught hold of me.

'That is Basil's wife!' she said, in a quick, agitated manner. 'Olga, I must go to the door to receive my son's wife. Come, my dear; come and help me to welcome her;' and, half unwillingly, I followed her into the hall.

'Basil, there is your mother,' I heard Aunt Catherine say; and from her voice I knew she was exceedingly nervous. And then Mr. Basil turned round quickly and saw us. He looked rather pale as he came into the hall, with a tall, handsome-looking woman beside him.

'Mother,' he said, in a very low voice, 'we have brought Aline back with us; Aunt Catherine thought it would be better.'

'You have done quite right, Basil. My dear, you are very welcome. I hope you will soon feel at home with us;' and she kissed her on the cheek.

I think young Mrs. Lyndhurst was hardly prepared for this demonstration, for she flushed up, and looked at her husband.

No one noticed me in this little scene, and I regained the drawing-room unperceived; but they followed me almost directly. Mrs. Lyndhurst was holding her daughter-in-law's hand. She placed her on the couch beside her, and asked her to remove her hat. As she did so, the elastic got entangled with her hair, and I went to her assistance. She looked at me in an odd, penetrating

way, as she thanked me. There was no want of civility in her tone, but I thought her manner cold. She was certainly very handsome, only it was a sort of heavy, statuesque beauty that did not attract me; and there was no animation in her face or voice.

'This is our young friend, Olga Leigh,' observed Mrs. Lyndhurst; 'we are all very fond of her.'

And then Mrs. Basil looked at me again in the same grave, penetrating way; but she did not smile or hold out her hand.

Involuntarily I drew back, a little chilled at this reception. I wondered how Mrs. Lyndhurst could talk on in that gentle, kindly manner, questioning her about her journey, and receiving in return only those monosyllabic replies. But perhaps the poor thing was frightened to death at finding herself among all these strangers.

'I am sure Aline is tired, Basil,' observed Aunt Catherine, breaking into this melancholy little duet.

'You are wrong; I am never tired,' replied Mrs. Basil. She did not speak abruptly, but in a slow, meditative way; and then she added: 'There is nothing in such a little journey to tire me.'

'I am glad that you are so strong,' returned Mrs. Lyndhurst kindly; 'good health is a great blessing.'

'Oh yes, I am strong; nothing ails me.'

And then again there was an awkward silence, only I noticed Mrs. Basil was looking about her in an odd way, as though she missed something. Of course, it was no business of mine to interfere, but I felt so sorry for them all. Mr. Basil was watching his wife so anxiously, and Aunt Catherine looked flushed and tired. If I could only help them! Without thinking, I acted on the impulse of the moment—in a thoroughly Olga-like way.

'You are looking for Reggie,' I said, in a low voice; 'he went to bed an hour ago. He was quite tired out with play. Would you like to see him asleep? I will take you to him'—the last words prompted by the intense eagerness in her eyes. There was no lack of animation now; she looked superbly handsome.

'Yes, let us go to him,' she returned, rising. And then she looked at her husband. 'I may go with this young lady to see Reggie, may I not?'

But before he could answer Mrs. Lyndhurst interposed: 'My dear, this is your home; there is no need to ask permission for anything. Go with Olga, by all means; it is a good thought of hers;' and we left the room at once.

As Mr. Basil opened the door for us, I asked him, in a whisper, if I had done wrong, would he go instead of me? but he only shook his head and drew back. I felt a little uncomfortable, and persisted.

'No, no; I would much rather have things as they are. I am only too grateful to you for proposing it;' and he went back into the room, and I rejoined Mrs. Basil, who was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs.

'What were you saying to him?' she asked, looking at me inquisitively.

I was rather surprised at the question, but replied that I had only asked if he would take my place.

'You need not have said that to him—it is better as it is,' was her strange answer. 'I am ever so much obliged to you for getting me out of that room; I thought I should have been suffocated with all those questions. George never asks me questions. But there, come along. I shall not feel right until I have had a look at Reggie.'

I kept my astonishment to myself, and took her to the room where Reggie was sleeping. Marsden was just leaving him. Mrs. Basil took no notice of her respectful salutation; she almost pushed past her in her eagerness to see her child.

It must have been a lovely sight to any mother's eyes. Reggie looked almost angelic in his sleep: he had thrown off the coverings; his dear little face was pillowed on one arm, the other flung over Peter, who was curled up beside him; his long lashes drooped over his flushed cheeks.

I heard a caught breath, almost like a sob. To my surprise the tears were coursing down Mrs. Basil's face.

'The little darling! How beautiful he looks! But what have they done with your hair, Reggie? Some one has cut off my baby's hair and never told his mother!'

'They were obliged to do it,' I whispered. 'Please do not wake him, he is sleeping so soundly. He was ill—very ill; and the doctor said it must be done, and Aunt Catherine was obliged to do it.'

'Yes, I know—he was ill—he might have died, and no one would have told me. His mother would have been the last to hear it; and it is this sort of thing I must bear, and say nothing.' And then, sinking on her knees beside the bed, she covered him with soft, noiseless kisses. 'My pretty boy! My darling Reg!' I heard her say over and over again.

I did not like to disturb her, so I left the room as quietly as possible, and waited outside in the corridor. Every now and then I could hear her murmuring fond words over him. With all her faults, Mrs. Basil certainly loved her child.

As I stood there looking down into the cool, fragrant old garden, Aunt Catherine came upstairs and joined me.

'Where is Aline?' she whispered.

'I have left her with Reggie. Please do not disturb her; she is very much upset, and of course she wants to be alone with her child.'

'We cannot leave her much longer, I am afraid,' she replied uneasily. 'Basil will be up directly, and he will want her to be ready before the gong sounds. Has she taken to you at all, Olga? Do you think she will let you help her?'

'I do not know,' I returned dubiously; 'but I will try what I can do;' and I went back into the room.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, still watching Reggie, but she was not crying now. There was a profound melancholy in her whole aspect—something in that drooping, grand-looking figure and finely-moulded head reminded me of a *Mater Dolorosa* I had once seen. She did not speak or move as I approached her.

'It is very late,' I said quietly; 'and in a few minutes the gong will sound for dinner. Will you let me show you to your room, and then perhaps I can help you?'

'Whose room is this?' she asked, starting and looking round her.

'I believe it is Mr. Basil's dressing-room. There is no time to show you your sitting-room now. This is your bedroom,' beckoning to her; and she rose reluctantly and followed me. I thought she looked round the spacious, handsomely-furnished room with an air of distaste.

'What a big place! I shall have room to breathe,' she remarked, but I could not tell whether with simplicity or sarcasm. 'And what grand windows!' She walked to one of them and looked out rather absently; but on my reminding her again of the time, she regarded me with a puzzled stare.

'I am sure I do not know what I am to do,' she said, rather defiantly. 'You seem to be expecting me to make a fine toilet, but I have no better gown than the one I've got on; and if that does not please you——' she walked up to a pier-glass as she spoke, and looked at herself from head to foot. 'I am afraid I don't look like a squire's lady,' she went on, 'in this dowdy gown,' with a hard little laugh; 'it was George's favourite—he had a fancy for gray; but it is not Basil's taste; he told me so as we came along.'

'Never mind about to-night,' I replied cheerfully; 'I have not changed my dress either.'

'Oh, white always looks smart! To my mind you are quite fit for a party. Do you live here, Miss——? There, I have forgotten your name.'

'Do I live at the Hall—is that what you mean?'

She nodded.

'Oh no; I live at Fircroft, a little lower down the village. My brother is the clergyman, and I live with him. You asked me my name just now; it is Olga Leigh, but I should like you to call me Olga.'

'I am sure I don't mind, though it is a strange, outlandish sort of name; for I feel more at home with you, somehow, than I did with the old ladies downstairs.' The idea of her calling my dear Aunt Catherine an old lady! 'And you did me a good turn, bringing me up to see Reggie. Would you believe it? Basil would have kept me talking there another hour before he would have remembered I was dying to see the boy.'

I found this confidence embarrassing, so I changed the subject by offering her some yellow chrysanthemums, set with dark leaves, and suggesting they would look well in her gray dress. She took them with an air of indifference, and adjusted them carelessly. I noticed she had no rings on her large shapely hands with the exception of her wedding-ring. Her hair was very nicely arranged in smooth coils that just suited her peculiar style. She did not seem to notice my inspection; she only spoke twice again: once to remark on the fineness of the towel she was using, and which seemed to surprise her; and the other was a comment on the number of looking-glasses.

'Rich people seem fond of looking at themselves,' she said, a little disdainfully.

I hurried her downstairs at last; they were waiting for us. Mr. Basil at once gave his arm to his mother, and Aunt Catherine took his wife. I do not believe Mrs. Basil would have opened her lips to join in the conversation if it had not been for Aunt Catherine, for Mrs. Lyndhurst looked too much exhausted to resume her soft questioning; but Aunt Catherine talked on manfully. I saw Mr. Basil make a sign to her once when Bennett was going to fill his wife's glass with champagne, and with ready tact she leant forward and addressed her.

'You are a water-drinker, are you not, my dear?' she said in the quietest manner. 'Bennett, Mrs. Basil never takes anything but water. I daresay she would like some of our nice home-made lemonade; it is such a cool, refreshing drink.'

I did not hear Mrs. Basil's answer, but I saw the crimson blood rise to her forehead, and she seemed as though she could not eat another morsel. I felt almost as ashamed myself, and yet no one could have noticed anything in Aunt Catherine's manner. I did not stay long after supper. Jem had not come for me, so

I asked Aunt Catherine in a low voice if one of the servants might walk with me. I was rather sorry that Mr. Basil overheard this remark, for he at once insisted on being my escort, and rather than make a fuss, I was obliged to submit. Mrs. Basil was sitting bolt upright on the couch beside her mother-in-law. She opened her eyes—such lovely eyes they were—very widely as I wished her good-night.

‘Why, how early you are going! Has Basil asked to walk with you?’

‘Yes; there was no need. One of the servants would have gone with me, but I generally have my brother. I hope you do not mind my taking him?’

‘No one ever thought of asking me such a question before,’ she replied in a voice that made Mrs. Lyndhurst look at us both in mild surprise. ‘Basil always pleases himself. I suppose you will be here to-morrow?’

‘I do not know; I am not sure,’ quite confused at this, for Mr. Basil could hear every word.

‘You will come if Aline wants you, will you not, Olga?’ interposed Aunt Catherine briskly. ‘Run across to-morrow afternoon as soon as the children have finished luncheon, and then you can stay to tea.’

And as I could not think of any plausible excuse to prevent my complying with this, I was obliged to acquiesce.

I confess Mr. Basil’s first words as we walked down the avenue took me by surprise.

‘Aline has taken a fancy to you, Miss Leigh.’

‘To me! What should put such an idea into your head?’

‘Why, it was pretty evident, was it not?’ And though it was quite dark under the trees, I could tell he was smiling. ‘She scarcely opened her lips to any one else; and then she wanted you to come to-morrow.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I am sure of it. Aline is not a woman of many words. What she says she means. You won her heart by taking her up to see Reggie. I was a fool not to think of it myself.’

‘She is certainly very fond of him.’

‘She has not seen the little chap for so long, and he has been ill; but she is not always ready to take notice of him.’ He stopped, as though he had said too much, and then continued in a different tone: ‘I am afraid my mother and Aline have not quite hit it off this evening. Does it not strike you that my mother seems depressed?’

‘Not more than usual. I mean her spirits are always variable.

I think, if you will pardon me for saying so, that you are judging too hastily; it is all so strange and new for your wife. Somehow I feel very sorry for her to-night.'

'You think she is to be pitied?' and I am sure there was a little pique in his tone.

'Oh, not in that way, at least,' feeling that I was beginning rather awkwardly; 'I am afraid you are misunderstanding me.'

'I would not do that for worlds,' he replied gently. 'Will you tell me what you really do mean?'

'Well, then, I feel sorry for Mrs. Basil because all her surroundings are so strange to her. She has never even seen your mother and Aunt Catherine; and though they are so kind to her, she finds it difficult to open her heart to them. Their conversation oppresses her; they have nothing in common; she has not been brought up in their way, and every moment she is afraid of offending their prejudices. She did not tell me this, but I can read it in her looks and silence.'

'Aline is generally silent; but you are right. When, indeed, have I ever found you wrong? Did she—did Aline interest you?'

'Very much;' but I wondered a little at the question.

'I ask that because I fear to trespass on your goodness; but if it would not trouble you too much, would you—should you very much mind giving her as much of your company as possible?'

'You wish me to be friends with your wife?'

'That is my meaning, certainly, if it would not tax your kindness too severely. I know how good it would be for Aline to have such a friend; it would be good for her—do you not think so?' turning to me abruptly.

I thought his manner strange. He did not seem quite like himself to-night; there was a sort of constraint about him, as though he were not at his ease; it was the first time he had ever spoken to me of his wife, and he seemed afraid of saying much. I told him in answer that I would gladly do all I could to make Mrs. Basil feel at home with us all, and that as I was nearer her age, she would most likely talk to me with more openness than she would to Aunt Catherine. In return he thanked me very gratefully, but still in the same guarded manner. It struck me then that he was feeling his position intensely, and that it required all his man's strength to keep his uneasiness to himself. I could not help thinking how sad it must be for any man—and especially one so proud and sensitive as Mr. Basil—to be tied for life to a woman whom he could not respect, and who repelled him by her strange sullenness.

In spite of my sympathy, I thought it better to change the

subject ; so I began talking about Kitty, and in a moment his old friendliness returned.

‘I am not surprised at your anxiety,’ he said frankly. ‘Indeed, I can only wonder at your brother’s cheerfulness. He must surely see that his wife is seriously ill.’

‘Oh, not seriously ! Please do not use that word.’

‘Very much out of health, then ; but, of course, a clever doctor will soon put her to rights. Do you know, Miss Leigh, this is the first time I have had an opportunity of telling you how much I like your brother Jem. Do you remember how you used to talk about him at St. Croix ?’

‘You like Jem ?’ in a tone of intense surprise.

‘You seem astonished. Why should I not like a bright, clever fellow like Leigh ?’

‘You do not seem to take to each other,’ I stammered, as Jem’s ridiculous sobriquet of the Don came to my recollection.

‘Oh, he is a little on his dignity with me ; I grant you that. Some of the best fellows in the world are not easy to know at first. Most likely he has not taken to me.’

‘I don’t know why you should say that,’ growing very hot over this little fib ; but Mr. Basil only laughed.

‘Oh, we shall hit it off presently, I daresay ; and now, just as we are talking about him, there he comes. I thought I heard Rollo’s bark a minute ago.’

It was a great relief to my mind to hear the friendly way in which the two young men accosted each other. My lecture had done Jem good. I could detect neither stiffness nor hauteur in his manner. He spoke cordially, thanked Mr. Basil for his escort, and apologised to me in the nicest way for being so late. I gave his arm a little squeeze as a mark of commendation, and I was still more pleased when Mr. Basil of his own accord walked with us to the door. I kept Jem in the porch a long time while I told him about Mrs. Basil.

He seemed much interested, and did not disturb me by any tiresome interruptions.

‘And she is very handsome ?’

‘Undeniably so. There cannot be two opinions about it. She is a grand-looking woman, and her eyes are beautiful.’

‘He had some excuse, then.’

‘Yes, of course ; every one says so. But, Jem, she does not make him happy ; there is no happiness in her face.’

‘Well, that is not your business, nor mine either,’ was Jem’s unsympathising retort ; ‘so don’t you go poking your inquisitive little nose, such a ridiculous nose as it is, too, into other folk’s

matrimonial concerns, or you will get scorched for your pains. I don't want you to come to me with "Oh, Jem, it hurts!" eh, Olga?

But, as usual, when he teased me with this babyish reminiscence, I ran after him and boxed his ears.

Unfortunately, Rollo barked a shrill, joyous bark, and then Hubert came out of the study and asked what we meant by waking up Kitty and the children. Dear me! how old and grave Hubert was growing! and if Rollo did bark, there was no need to speak so severely. I told Jem so; but he silenced my grumbling in a minute.

'Poor beggar!' he said in a pitying tone, 'he is a bit low to-night about his little woman. Kitty was rather hysterical before she went to bed because cook gave warning; so there was a precious row. Hubert scolded the cook, and brought her to reason; and then he told Kitty she was a baby to take such a thing to heart, and he ended by carrying her up to bed, for the poor little thing was all of a tremble, as nurse says; and he has been as glum as possible ever since.'

'Oh, Jem, I am so sorry that Rollo made all that noise! I will go in and tell him so.'

'You will do nothing of the kind,' replied Jem, taking hold of me in his rough way. 'I won't have the poor old man bothered. Just go to bed, and don't let us see you again until morning.'

And with this polite injunction, Jem took off Rollo to his sleeping-quarters.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LADY GWENDOLINE'S ROOM

'I have much need of good advice.'—SIR WALTER SCOTT.

'I love that beauty should go beautifully.'—TENNYSON.

I ENTERTAINED Kitty the next morning by giving her a graphic account of young Mrs. Lyndhurst's reception. She was greatly interested, and so was Hubert; for she made me repeat it all over again for his benefit.

'The Ladies have been so kind to you, Olga, that I think you ought to help them as much as possible,' she said in her sensible way; and as Hubert endorsed this opinion, I went off to spend the afternoon at the Hall, with the comfortable consciousness that I was doing my duty.

I found Aunt Catherine writing business letters in the library. She looked up with quite a relieved air as I entered.

'I am so glad you have come, dear,' she said warmly; 'Aline has been asking for you half a dozen times. She is rather tired, and has gone up to the Lady's Room to rest;' for the quaint bay-windowed room that had been set apart for Mrs. Basil's use was always called the Lady's Room, in memory of the unfortunate Lady Gwendoline.

'How have you got on this morning?' I asked a little curiously.

'I hardly know,' with a thoughtful air. 'Aline talks very little, and it is difficult to break through her reserve. We were obliged to leave her to Basil at last. He has been behaving like a model husband all the morning. He has taken her over the house and shown her everything, and they were out in the garden a long time with Reggie. Basil is there now with the child; but the worst of it is that I cannot find out whether she is pleased or

not. She looks at everything, but nothing seems to interest her much. Virginia asked her at luncheon what she thought of the Hall, and she only said "it was a big place, and very old, and that she thought it must be dull in winter." She has taken a dislike to the rooks; she owned to Basil that she hated their harsh caws.'

This did not sound very promising; Aunt Catherine's grave manner said more than her words. Mrs. Basil had evidently repelled their efforts at intimacy. What a strange young woman she must be! I asked if Reggie had been with her all the morning.

'Yes, I believe so; he is always with Basil, you know; but I cannot see that she takes much notice of him. No, indeed'—as I looked astonished at this. 'She never once kissed him or spoke to him while I was in the room, and the child never went to her of his own accord. I confess I am a little disheartened, and Virginia is even more so, for we do want to make her happy with us.'

'Dear Aunt Catherine, it is so trying for you.'

'I think she looks upon us as old people. She was quite surprised to hear how far I could walk, and that I took so much exercise; but I must not go on chattering. Basil has been hindering me, and I have half a dozen letters to write before post-time. You had better run up to the Lady's Room now, and see if you can induce Aline to be a little more sociable.'

I obeyed reluctantly. Alas! my long cosy afternoons with Aunt Catherine already belonged to the past. The Hall would be a different place to me now. I knocked at the door, but as no one bade me enter, I turned the handle and went in. Mrs. Basil was sitting in the bay-window—it had a circular cushioned seat—her hands were listlessly folded in her lap. Reggie was evidently playing in the garden beneath, for I heard his laugh as I closed the door. I think she had been watching him, but she rose directly she saw me.

'So you've come,' she said abruptly. 'I have been looking for you this last hour; I was beginning to think you were not going to keep your word; I told Basil so. Aren't you going to take off your hat and stop a bit?'

'Oh yes, if you wish it;' and I proceeded to unbutton my gloves.

'Do you always wear white?' was her next remark.

I thought it a singular one. She had not shaken hands, but in her own way she seemed disposed to friendliness.

'Not always,' I replied; 'washing is expensive, even in the

country; but Aunt Catherine likes me best in white, so I try to please her.'

'Why do you call her that?' she went on still more abruptly. 'She is not a relation of yours, is she?'

'No,' I replied, colouring; 'but I have been used to call her Aunt Catherine ever since I was a child. I think I love her better than any one else except my brothers'—brother, I was going to say.

'I suppose you are one of those who attach themselves easily?' she replied, giving me at the same time a searching glance that made me extremely uncomfortable. 'I wish I were like you in that respect, but one can only act up to one's own nature. I was never very soft, except to Basil, but he had a way with him; and though I acted like the biggest fool that ever lived, I could not help myself.'

'I suppose not. What a pretty room this is, Mrs. Lyndhurst! and this window is so delightful!'

'Why don't you say Aline? I am not used to the other name, and it sounds stiff from a girl like you. You are ever so much younger than me, aren't you? I am sure you look so.'

'I am twenty.'

'And I am eight-and-twenty—going on for nine-and-twenty, that is. George says I look half a dozen years older than Basil; but that is because I have grown so stout. I was quite slim when he first took up with me.'

'You are not really stout,' for the word did not suit her fine massive proportion in the least. I saw my remark pleased her.

'Don't go away with the idea that I am vain,' she said, actually smiling; 'but I want to ask you a question. Do you think, does any one think, that I am handsome?'

I wondered what Aunt Catherine would have said if she had heard her!

'Certainly; every one thinks so. How could they help it?' for I was answering her question as simply as she put it.

She brightened up still more.

'I never could get George to tell me. He always said "I was well enough"; but that did not satisfy me. Now Basil has been worrying me half the morning to go up to town with his aunt, and order some new gowns; for, as he says, the under-housemaid is dressed better than me, and he wants me to look my best. Now just tell me the truth: Do you think all the fine dresses in the world would make me look like a real lady, like my mother-in-law or Miss Sefton?'

It would be impossible to describe my feelings as she put this

singular question. I hardly dared to look at her as I answered her. I began to think Mr. Basil's shrewdness was not at fault, and that this strange, impulsive woman must have taken a fancy to me, or she would never have spoken to me with such frankness.

'I think you would look very nice!' I stammered; 'that you have no idea how nice you would look;' and then I continued more boldly: 'I know it is strange that dress should make such a difference, but it is true, nevertheless; every one says so;' and as I uttered this oracular remark, I could not help thinking how one of Mrs. Lyndhurst's velvet gowns would set off her large, massive beauty, and what a sensation she would make in the county.

'Do you really mean what you say?' she returned eagerly; 'then I will have a try—I mean, I will try to look my best. I am afraid'—flushing slightly—'that living with George has not improved me; he is not careful about his words, and one gets into bad ways. When Basil was with me, I managed better;' and as she made this naïve apology, I noticed that though her voice was deep, it was very full and sweet, and that she spoke without any unpleasant accent. No, there was nothing vulgar about her, only a slight want of culture that, perhaps, time might mend.

'Well, then, I may as well go up to town to-morrow and see about my clothes,' she went on; 'and supposing you come with me? There is no need to trouble Basil's aunt.'

'But I am not so experienced,' I remonstrated, 'and Aunt Catherine has such good taste; she would help you far better.'

'Oh, there will be no need of help,' she replied rather decidedly; 'if we go to a good place, we shall do very well. I know exactly what suits me; and if I am in doubt, I am pretty sure to know what Basil would like. He is wonderfully particular about ladies' dress; so you had better make up your mind for a day's outing.'

'Very well,' I answered rather reluctantly; for though I loved shopping with Aunt Catherine, I felt this would be quite different; still, I was sure, in my own mind, that the Ladies would wish me to accept any overture on Mrs. Basil's part.

She did not seem to notice my unwillingness; and we talked a little more. Dress is an exhaustive subject, and we both found plenty to say about it. She was a little absent in her manner sometimes; and once, to attract her attention, I called her Aline; and she turned round at once with such a sweet smile.

'That is nice of you,' she said heartily; 'nothing pleases me better than to take me at my word, for I always mean what I say. It is odd, our getting on so well together, isn't it? For, as I told you just now, I am seldom soft with people; but I shall not forget in a hurry that you were the only one who understood me yester-

day. You got me out of that room so cleverly when I was pent up to that degree I could hardly breathe, with all those eyes on me, and Basil watching me, as though he were afraid I should do something dreadful. It never entered his head that I was pining for a sight of my boy.'

'He had forgotten for the moment, and he knew Reggie was asleep. Aline, you have never told me how you like your new home?' for there was a cloud on her brow that I was anxious to dispel.

'They asked me that at dinner—I mean luncheon; but I could not answer them. It is a grand place, of course; only I feel lost in it, somehow. I think it hurts me to see Basil looking so much at home and as though everything belonged to him, and he had never been used to anything else; while I am not fit to take my proper place beside him.'

'Oh, you will soon take it; you will soon get used to things, too.'

But she shook her head.

'I have not been brought up among gentlefolks, as Basil has. Oh, I have seen his friends—fine Oxford men, and that Mr. Fleming who educated him; but I could not get on with one of them. Basil was never so nice to me when his friends were with us; he was always more fault-finding and impatient.'

'But surely you are pleased with this lovely room!' I exclaimed, looking round with girlish admiration.

I think I had never seen a room that pleased me better. The carved cabinets; the small Indian tables inlaid with curious woods; the quaint portraits of Sefton ladies in oval frames; the old-fashioned couch and easy-chairs—all harmonised so well with the oak-panelling. In this room the hapless Gwendoline must have sat like Mariana at the moated grange, with the same words on her lips:

'Old faces glimmered through the doors,
Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
Old voices called her from without;
She only said, "My life is dreary;
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary;
I would that I were dead!"'

As I spoke, Aline raised herself, and looked at it all rather indifferently.

'Oh yes. I liked this room best in the house. Basil said he chose it for me because it was so quiet. There is one thing about it that does not suit me—I hear those horrid rooks so plainly.'

'I am so sorry you dislike them ; they are Aunt Catherine's favourite pensioners.'

'Oh, I must put up with what I don't like. Basil seemed disappointed because I told him that I would rather be back in the little cottage at Highgate ; but there, cottage or Hall, it is all the same, if one must take one's self everywhere. If we could only get rid of ourselves !' rather gloomily.

At that moment Marsden came to say that tea was waiting in the drawing-room.

'Couldn't we have it up here, Olga ?' interposed Aline, with a shrug. 'It will be so dull in that big room downstairs.'

'I think we had better go,' I returned quickly. 'I have not spoken to Mrs. Lyndhurst ; and she and Aunt Catherine will be expecting us.'

'Oh, do as you like,' she replied, rather sulkily ; and I half repented my decision.

It was too late to retract, however ; but I felt intensely aggravated to see how Aline resumed her cold, indifferent air the moment she entered the drawing-room. She greeted her husband without a smile when he came to meet us with a pleasant inquiry as to the manner in which we had spent the afternoon ; indeed, she left me to answer him, and sat down beside Mrs. Lyndhurst. I did my best to thaw her, but without success. Aunt Catherine looked at me in a pitying way.

'How have you got through these two hours, you poor child ?' she whispered, as she passed me a cup of tea ; and I could hardly refrain from laughing.

Partly to mystify them, and partly to compel Aline to speak, I said very quietly :

'Aline and I have been planning a day's outing. She wants me to go up to town with her to-morrow, and help her with her shopping. What do you say, Aunt Catherine ?'

Mr. Basil darted a quick, amused look at me, which said as plainly as possible, 'Did I not tell you so ?' But Aunt Catherine, who was filling up the teapot, let the boiling water overflow in her surprise. I think we were all astonished when Aline jumped up and took the silver kettle out of her hand.

'You have overfilled it,' she said brusquely ; 'and the water is trickling all over the tray. Why don't you fetch a cloth, Basil ? Your aunt will scald herself.'

'I had better ring for Bennett,' he replied, walking across the room very lazily ; and Aline sat down as though she had been detected in some fault.

'Oh, I forgot the servants !' she muttered.

'Thank you, my dear; you have been very kind and helpful,' replied Aunt Catherine, quite pleased at this little attention from her stately niece. 'I have made a terrible mess; but Bennett will soon put it right for me. So you have arranged to go to town with Olga? Well, I am sure you could not have selected a better companion.'

'Well, Olga is young, and one won't be afraid of tiring her,' observed Aline rather ungraciously; 'and we have a long day's work before us. If you will tell us where to go—who are the best people, I mean—and how much I am to spend, we shall manage all the rest.'

'I suppose you don't want my help, Aline?' asked her husband pleasantly.

'Oh, there is no need to trouble any of you,' was the off-hand answer. 'Olga and I'—she was going to say 'me,' but stopped herself in time—'Olga and I will do very well, and I know all your likes and dislikes; so your taste won't be affronted.'

'Then in that case I will make myself useful by looking out your trains. I suppose I may be allowed to meet you at the station? or do you intend to dismiss me for the day?'

Mr. Basil was half joking, I could see, but it was evident that Aline did not understand humour, for she answered him quite seriously:

'I am thinking you will please yourself, as usual, so it is no use asking me. Perhaps, as Miss Leigh is such pleasant company, you may choose to make yourself agreeable.'

'You may consider my offer retracted,' he replied, jumping up from the table; and I saw at once that he was displeased. 'Do you think the little chap has finished his tea, Aunt Catherine?'

'Now, what have I said to make him go off in that way?' asked Aline in an injured tone. 'Did you ever see any one so quick-tempered, Olga? But he is always like that.'

'My dear, please do not say such things of my son,' observed Mrs. Lyndhurst in feeble alarm at this.

Aline stared at her.

'If he is your son, I suppose he is my husband,' she said pettishly; 'and I have every right to find fault with him.'

'What nonsense!' I said impatiently. 'Who in their senses would find fault with such a trifle? Come in the garden, Aline; I have just half an hour before I must go.'

To my relief, she followed me at once.

'You were right to take me up,' she said confidentially. 'I need not have been so touchy with Basil's mother; but it is as well to let them know that I have not the best of tempers, and

then they won't give me more than I can bear. There is Basil. I expect he has got over his crossness by this time. I mean to ask him to go with us to the station.'

'If I were you, I would just leave it alone.'

But Aline was not a woman who possessed much tact. She called to her husband rather peremptorily.

'You need not have been so short with me, Basil; I meant no harm. I should be glad enough if you would go to the station with us.'

'I am very sorry, but it is impossible,' he returned gravely. 'I am going over to Brighton for the day with Reggie.'

'You have made your plans pretty quickly, that is all I can say,' she replied, rather aggrieved at this. 'You might have asked first if I wanted Reggie to go with us.'

'It is not likely I should do anything of the kind,' he replied curtly. 'A day's shopping would be far too fatiguing for any child. I am going to let him have a run on the beach and see the boats; the sea air will be good for him.'

'Reggie—it is always Reggie!' she replied angrily.

But I would not let her proceed. I touched her arm, and whispered to her that I wanted to show her the Lady's Walk, and I gave Mr. Basil a look as I did so. Aline was decidedly ruffled. She turned a deaf ear to my soothing speeches, and as soon as we were under the dark fir trees she burst out passionately:

'Reggie, indeed! I wonder I don't hate the child, though he is my own, for Basil thinks of nothing else. I wish I had not asked him to come; it has only made him think more of himself. He will be as high and mighty all the evening as possible, when you are gone. I will just shut myself up in my room, and take no notice of any one. Well, are you going to tell me the ghost story?'

'Wait a moment,' for I could hear footsteps crunching the dead leaves behind me, and Mr. Basil came up in his quick way.

'I am sorry I disappointed you just now, Aline. I will give up Brighton for to-morrow, and go with you as far as Victoria. I have business I ought to finish, and we might take the same train back. Will that satisfy you?' looking at her anxiously.

'Thank you, Basil,' was all she said; and he went away without another word. Aline stood quite still for a few minutes. 'I wonder what made him change his mind? I never knew him do such a thing before. If he always spoke as kindly as he did just now!' she sighed heavily, and by tacit consent we changed the subject.

When I bade her good-bye, I kissed her, but she made no sort of response.

'Is she really cold and undemonstrative by nature?' I thought; 'or is it shyness and an uncomfortable sense of inferiority that makes her keep people at a distance?' But I found myself unable to answer this question.

And another thing puzzled me: would Mr. Basil have reconsidered his hasty speech if I had not given him that reproachful look?

I found Kitty far more cheery. She rallied me in her old way on my new friendship, as she termed it.

'What a pity we did not leave our expedition until Thursday!' I observed; 'and then we could all have gone up to town together.'

Kitty's face fell a little at this.

'Oh, I forgot to tell you,' she said hurriedly: 'Hubert has found out that there is a meeting of clergy here that day, and as he has several important engagements during the remainder of the week, we have put off going until the following Thursday.'

'My dear Kitty, what a mistake!'

'Not at all. I am much better to-day—Hubert says so—and I feel it myself; so please do not say anything more about it.'

She finished with the Kitty-like dignity that always silenced one.

When I reached the station the next morning, I found Aline and her husband walking up and down the platform. They both looked in excellent spirits. Aline was perhaps quieter than she had been the previous day; but she seemed contented, and I noticed Mr. Basil was on his best behaviour, and paid her a good deal of attention.

When we reached Victoria, he put us into a hansom, and we drove to a dressmaker Aunt Catherine had recommended—a certain Madame Hortense. As we drove through the crowded streets, Aline told me that she had had a grand confabulation with Aunt Catherine and Marsden the previous night.

'Marsden—isn't that her name?—is to get me all I want in the way of underclothing, but I am to do the rest myself. I am to order a mantle, and one of those fashionable jackets they are wearing now; and I must have a bonnet for church, and a hat. So you see we shall have plenty to do before five o'clock.'

I wondered what Madame Hortense thought of Aline. She certainly treated her with the respect she would have shown to a duchess. Aline was not at all flurried; she went through her business in the most matter-of-fact way. She seemed to know by intuition the colour and material that would suit her best.

As we sat at luncheon in the little shop in New Street, I

could not help expressing my surprise at the delicacy of her taste.

'I think that sort of thing is born with one,' she returned carelessly. 'I was always considered the best-dressed girl in Holloway—at least, George said so. Poor George! I wonder how he is getting on? I could not have worn the tawdry ribbons and flimsy laces other girls did, to save my life. When we were first married Basil often praised me for my neatness. Olga,' interrupting herself as the covered dish of cutlets was placed before us, 'I know you are as tired as tired can be; and, for the matter of that, so am I. Don't you think a glass of wine would freshen us up?'

'Oh no; we could not order anything of the kind here,' I returned, growing hot in a moment. 'A cup of coffee would be far better. Ladies never order wine.'

I do not know what Aline thought of my speech, for in my consternation I had quite overlooked the fact that a gray-haired lady at the next table was calmly sipping a glass of sherry at that very moment. But Aline good-naturedly ignored this fact, and ordered the coffee. This was the only contretemps, and we spent the rest of the afternoon pleasantly enough.

I could not help noticing that wherever we went Aline excited a great deal of attention. She seemed quite unconscious of the fact. Once, as we were walking down Regent Street, she asked me if anything was wrong with her, and on my assuring her that she looked as tidy as possible, she said simply, 'Oh, I thought my hat was crooked—that man stared so.' And she really seemed to mean what she said.

Mr. Basil was waiting for us when we drove up to the station. He hurried us off to take our places, for the train was just starting.

'Why, you look as fresh as possible, Aline!' he said, as we moved off. 'I thought you and Miss Leigh would be quite done up.'

'Olga is tired, I believe,' she returned. 'But I have had a pleasant day, and enjoyed it. I like the shops and the crowds of people; and every one was so civil.'

'And how many smart gowns have you ordered?' he asked good-humouredly.

'Oh, I am not going to tell you,' she answered rather shyly. 'Olga, don't you answer any of his questions. I am going to surprise you.'

And then, of course, he began teasing us both by a series of cross-questioning; but I could see he was doing it to amuse her.

I went back to dinner with them, but I suppose, after all, Aline was tired, for she seemed put out because she had nothing but her gray gown to wear, and Mr. Basil was in evening dress.

'He might have kept me in countenance for once,' she complained. 'And there is his mother in her black velvet, and I look like a milkmaid among them. Basil only laughed when I told him so, and said I was growing vain;' and for the remainder of the evening she relapsed into her old silence.

But she thawed a little when Jem came in to fetch me. Jem always knew how to make himself agreeable to ladies, and I saw at once by his manner that he was immensely struck with her, though he would not own it.

'Well, what do you think of Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst?' I asked, as we hurried down the avenue, for the night was wet.

'I think she just matches the Don, and that I should not like to be in his place;' and that was all I could get out of Jem.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LADYBIRD PLAYS PRANKS

'Lois the Healer prayed,
With soul uplift,
"O Love, the beautiful,
Give me this gift,
Comfort and help to be
Where'er I go ;
Cool in the summer time,
Warmth in the snow,"'
Anon.

DURING the next few days I saw a great deal of Aline ; indeed, I began to feel that I never had a moment to myself, and that I was neglecting Kitty and the children shamefully. All my little home duties were unfulfilled ; I neither helped the twins with their lessons, nor assisted nurse with the needlework. Jem complained that I was never at home, and I saw the same unspoken reproach in Harry's eyes. It was in vain that I protested and excused myself. Every morning one of Aunt Catherine's notes summoned me to the Hall on some plea or other. 'I am very sorry, but Aline has set her heart on a day at Brighton, and she refuses to go unless you are of the party ;' or, 'Aline has to return Lady Medhurst's call, and she wants you to drive over with her, as Basil is engaged,' and so on.

I turned restive at last, and told Aunt Catherine plainly that Aline expected too much of me. I was very willing to do what I could for her, but she must understand that my home people had a claim on me. She listened to me very quietly, and without making any observation, and I thought, of course, that she agreed with me in thinking Aline rather importunate in her demands on my time.

I was greatly surprised, therefore, when Hubert spoke to me

the next day. He was a little mysterious in his manner, and hemmed and hawed a good deal. He began by saying that he had a great respect for Miss Sefton, and that he owed her a return for her kindness to me. 'She has been talking to me about you,' he went on. 'She seems in a little difficulty about Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst. She is rather peculiar, and does not seem to take to them much. And she says no one but you seems to please her; and she has been asking me, as a special favour, to spare you to them as much as possible. We had quite a long talk about it, Kitty and I, and we have made up our minds that we must do all we can to ease the poor ladies, for really, as Kitty says, young Mrs. Lyndhurst is such a handful, and she does not wonder Miss Sefton is worried about her; so we think you ought to be up at the Hall as much as possible; and as for the children's lessons, Kitty says she will manage all those herself.'

If Aunt Catherine had appealed to Hubert, it was no use my saying a word. Hubert would be so flattered by her confidence that he would not listen to me, and I found it was no good grumbling to Kitty; and as Jem was going to Oxford in a day or two, he would not be able to fight my battles.

I made one vain attempt to coax Kitty.

'You know,' I said persuasively, 'that I would much rather be here with you, or overlooking Jessie and Mab's lessons in the school-room, than wasting so many hours with Aline. I might as well be her paid companion at once, if I am to drive about with her, and pay visits, and help her with her fancy-work. She is getting to depend on me far too much.'

'But, Olga,' she said, looking up from her work in evident surprise at my dissatisfied tone, 'aren't you just a little contradictory about this? Once you never passed a day happily if you did not go up to the Hall, and now, when Miss Sefton wants you so badly, you are always making excuses about being needed at home.'

I felt myself flush over Kitty's downright speech, but it was no use trying to make her understand; indeed, I hardly understood myself why the Hall seemed so different to me now, but I only felt that I should be much happier at home.

There were no cosy talks with Aunt Catherine, no long, lingering chats in the twilights. If I stopped a moment with her or Mrs. Lyndhurst, Marsden would come down with a peremptory message to summon me to Aline's room, or she would come in search of me herself. And she was by no means a restful companion, either. She had strange, difficult moods, when nothing seemed to please

her, and she complained bitterly of the dulness of her surroundings—when she would take offence at a word, and make every one in the house uncomfortable.

Her chief complaint seemed to be that she saw so little of her husband; that he was always shut up in the library with Aunt Catherine, or riding about on that fine new horse of his. In vain I tried to explain to her that he was only doing his duty.

'All these years,' I said, 'Aunt Catherine has been obliged to manage the estate as well as she could with the help of a bailiff, and now Mr. Basil has come home, of course it is only right that he should help her. He has so much to learn, you see, and only Aunt Catherine can show him things.'

'Oh, that is all very well, as far as it goes,' she returned, not abating her injured tone. 'Of course he is the Squire, and must manage the property—I am not such a child that I do not know that; but, all the same, he need not spend all the rest of the day playing with Reggie or riding across the country.'

'It is such a new pleasure to him, and he is so proud of his handsome mare,' I pleaded, for this had been his mother's first gift to him, and I shall never forget his boyish look of pleasure when he first mounted the beautiful creature and rode her down the avenue. 'And he is not wasting his time, either, for he goes to see his tenants. Why don't you learn to ride, and then you can go with him?'

'He has not offered to teach me,' she replied with a curl of her lip, for she was in a perverse mood that day. 'There is to be a pony for Reggie. His grandmother was talking about it at luncheon—a little Shetland pony with a long tail. It is not that I begrudge Reg his pony,' with a touch of motherliness in her tone, 'but Basil will never think of me as long as he has got the boy beside him.'

'Why do you not speak to him about it? I daresay the idea of your riding with him has never entered his head.'

'I would not ask him for worlds,' she returned with an uneasy flush. 'I know how he would hate to see my awkwardness, and no one can ride well at first. I am getting too stout, too,' for Aline was always morbid on this point.

'You do not walk enough,' I replied, turning this speech to account. 'We should all of us get stout if we sat in the house as much as you do.'

'I know I am lazy,' she returned more good-humouredly; 'I was never one for much running about, and driving is far pleasanter than picking one's way along muddy lanes,' for October had set in

rather wet and gloomy, and certainly the roads round Brookfield were muddy.

'You might play tennis, though,' I continued; for, to Harry's great delight, the Squire was having an asphalt court made on a little slip of unoccupied ground near the stables, and he and Aunt Catherine were very busy over it—indeed, I am sure Mr. Basil never had an unoccupied moment, and he was looking better and brighter in consequence.

I made many efforts to rouse Aline from her indolence. I wanted to teach her to dance, to play the piano, to learn French—in fact, I rated her pretty severely for her laziness. She took everything I said in good part, for she never turned sulky with me; but I could not rouse her to interest in anything except fancy-work—she was very clever over that—or reading exciting novels, which she would devour greedily.

I used to wonder why she never played with Reggie. Now and then we took him to drive with us, or she would send for him on the plea that Miss Olga wanted the child; but she rarely did so of her own accord. And yet she was by no means indifferent to him. I would often find her at her window watching him when he was playing with his father; and if she heard him suddenly running down the passage, she would rise hurriedly as though to go to him, and then in a moment resume her place. One day we had an uncomfortable proof of the strong undercurrent of feeling that was hidden under her apparent indifference.

I was playing one afternoon in the hall with Reggie at battledore and shuttlecock, when Mr. Basil suddenly rode up to the door, and Reggie ran out on the steps in a state of great excitement.

'Give Reggie a ride, father,' he said coaxingly, for he had had this treat once before. And as Mr. Basil laughed and nodded—for when had he refused his idolised boy anything?—I lifted him up, and saw him safely deposited before his father.

I thought I had never seen a prettier sight than when Ladybird pranced and curveted in her coquettish way, and finally broke into a gentle canter up and down the avenue. Reggie was in his prune-coloured velvet suit, with a deep lace collar; and as he sat there, with his erect little figure, with his father's arm thrown round him, he looked like some childish prince. In spite of his diminutive size and delicacy, he was such a noble-looking child.

At that moment I heard a long-drawn breath beside me, almost like a sigh, and, to my surprise, Aline was standing behind me, watching them; but there was such an intense melancholy in her gaze that I feared to speak to her.

Just then they returned. Reggie was laughing and gesticulating

when, unhappily, one of the tame pheasants about the place suddenly rose into the air close to them, with the strange whirring sound that they always make, startling Ladybird almost out of her senses. She reared and snorted, and for one terrible instant I thought they would both be thrown. Aline thought so too, for she uttered a suppressed scream; but the next moment Ladybird brought her fore-feet down again, and, turning sharply round, broke into a mad gallop down the avenue. Aline tore past me; she was as white as death. Mr. Basil had not lost his presence of mind; he held his boy firmly, and spoke soothingly to his frightened mare, keeping his own seat in a masterly way, and in a minute or two he succeeded in checking her. She was still shying and snorting nervously, when Aline, at no small risk to herself, almost snatched Reggie from his father. Her eyes were blazing with anger; her breast heaved with emotion.

'How dare you!' she cried, pressing the child to her. 'How dare you, Basil! Is he not my child as well as yours? I will not bear it, I tell you!'

Mr. Basil dismounted quietly, and, patting the mare's neck, gave her in charge to a groom who came running from the stables; then he followed us into the house. Aline had sunk into a chair, but she was still clutching Reggie, who looked bewildered and a little frightened at her vehemence. I wanted to take him from her, but she resisted angrily.

'He is not yours—he is mine! Go away, Olga!' she cried, with a stamp of her foot; and I drew back at once.

'I am sorry to have given you such a fright, Aline,' observed her husband. He looked almost as pale and disturbed as she did, but he spoke quietly. 'Ladybird has never played me such a trick before, but, then, she was startled.'

'You might have killed him!' she said passionately; 'and I must stand by and see it. You treat me cruelly, Basil. Didn't I beg you never to do it again? Wasn't it only yesterday that I said I could not bear your risking it? But there, you mind me no more than if I were the wind.'

'My dear girl,' he said, putting his arm round her, but she shook him off, 'pray don't excite yourself like this. Ladybird is like a lamb generally. Do you think I would not be as careful of the little chap as you would be yourself? Why, what nonsense, child! and it was pure accident. Miss Leigh will bear me witness, I am sure.'

He need not have brought in my name; it only angered her the more.

'Miss Leigh, indeed! What does she know of a mother's

feelings? What is Reggie to her? Isn't he my boy? But there, you care about nothing but pleasing yourself. No, you shall not have him,' still holding Reggie tightly; and I could see she was trembling all over with passion—'you will go along with me, won't you, Reg?'

But Reggie was spoiled, and he chose to be of a different opinion.

'No,' he said, rather crossly; 'I'll stay with father and my Dear—— Put me down, mother.'

At the boy's petulant speech her arms unloosened their hold, and at once dropped wearily to her side; a strange sort of look came over her face.

'I forgot,' she said, rising with a short, hard laugh; 'he is more yours, after all;' and she gave him a rough push. 'Go to them, Reggie. I wouldn't keep you for worlds;' and Mr. Basil, with a grieved look, took up his boy.

'You ought not to say such things to me, Aline,' he replied; 'I haven't deserved them. I try to study you. It is you who are not treating me well.'

'Oh, I will not hear you!' she returned, putting her hands to her ears, and walking like a tragedy-queen across the hall.

Mrs. Lyndhurst, who was standing at the drawing-room door, and had been a spectator of this little scene, stepped up to Mr. Basil and touched his arm.

'Go to her,' she whispered. 'It is her nerves; she has had a fright. Give me Reggie, and go to her;' but he shook his head.

'It would be no use, mother; I know Aline by this time. She chooses to feel aggrieved, and she would not speak to me. You must give her time to recover herself; she will be best alone.'

Mrs. Lyndhurst did not look quite convinced; she gave me an appealing glance.

'May I go to Aline?' I asked timidly.

'You! No; certainly not!' more abruptly than I had ever heard him speak to me before. And as I drew back, very much abashed at this, he said, more gently: 'Do you think I would expose you to such annoyance? You take trouble enough with Aline; but when she is in one of these moods she might not treat you well.'

'You are wrong,' I returned eagerly; 'Aline is never cross with me.'

'Is she not?' with a glimmer of a smile, but he still looked very pale. 'I am glad to hear it; but all the same, I do not wish you to go to her now;' and though I knew he was wrong, and

that he was determined to punish Aline for her fit of passion, I was obliged to obey him ; so I went into the drawing-room, and after a moment Mrs. Lyndhurst followed me.

'I must go now,' I observed ; 'it is no use my waiting any longer for Aunt Catherine. Most likely she will not be back for another hour ;' for Aunt Catherine had gone for a round of visits, which she had vainly tried to induce Aline to pay with her ; but young Mrs. Lyndhurst only performed her conventional duties by fits and starts.

'Well, my dear, do as you like ; for, as Basil says, you take trouble enough for us. But, all the same, I wish he would have let you have your way. No one has such an influence over Aline as you have ; but he seems too much hurt to care about putting things right.'

'Yes ; and she will just make herself ill brooding over it all. I never knew any one so morbid. I don't believe she means half she says. She just flings off these excited speeches as a sort of vent—a safety-valve to her feelings. People never mean what they say in passion. Mr. Basil ought to remember that, even though he is vexed at her want of self-control.'

'You are right. I only wish Basil heard you. But men like to have their own way, and he is too much offended to hear reason. They are an ill-assorted couple'—and Mrs. Lyndhurst sighed. 'Aline will never make him happy.'

I echoed this sigh as I went down the avenue. I felt troubled and unnerved by what had passed. Aline's thoughts had been for her boy. She had not seemed to understand that her husband had also been in danger. If Ladybird had fallen back—and it was almost a miracle that the startled creature had recovered her balance—Mr. Basil would have been flung among the gnarled tree-trunks, and the mare would have rolled on him. I turned sick at the mere thought ; and, instead of thankfulness that her two treasures were safe, Aline had hurled angry words at her husband ; and yet, from his white, shaken looks, he had been quite aware of their danger.

I spent a miserable evening, thinking of it all ; and when I set out for the Hall the next afternoon, I was full of forebodings as to the manner of my reception. To my surprise, I found Aline sitting tranquilly over her embroidery-frame. She pushed it away when she saw me.

'There, I was just getting sick of work, so I am glad you have come,' she observed, in her usual manner. 'There are some visitors downstairs. My mother-in-law sent up for me just now, but I told Marsden to say I had a headache. Oh, you need not

disbelieve me,' with one of her shrewd guesses at my thoughts. 'I am not inventing; all that fuss yesterday has upset me. I wanted Basil to let me have some sal-volatile just now—it would have done me good—but he says he does not hold with drugs; so I told him I did not hold with talking to visitors with a headache, and that he might go to them himself. I believe he has taken me at my word.'

'I am sorry you do not feel well,' in a sympathetic tone. Certainly her eyes did look a little heavy.

'Oh, it is all very fine to say that now; but why did you go off without bidding me good-bye yesterday? I had a regular fit of hysterics when I got upstairs. For once that husband of mine got properly frightened.'

'Do you mean to say——'

And then I stopped. It was no affair of mine if Mr. Basil went to her or not.

'Marsden fetched him. I would have died before I'd have sent for him. But he wasn't so bad, after all: he just scolded me a bit. George does that. They say it is no use being soft with people in hysterics. But when I came round he was quite coaxing, and stayed with me for ever so long; and then he fetched his mother. I told him that I did not want her, and that she would only fidget me; and I asked for him to send for you instead; but he was a little cross at that. "Nonsense!" he said, fuming a bit, just because I contradicted him. "Miss Leigh has gone home, and I cannot have her disturbed by every whim. There is my mother always ready to do anything." And when I saw he was bent on it, I told him he might send her up.'

'That was good of you.'

'Well, I did not want to affront Basil again so soon; and he is so touchy about his mother. But I declare to you, Olga, that she made me so nervous, that I felt all over pins and needles. I cannot make out why she fidgets me so, but that soft, low voice of hers almost drives me crazy.'

'Aunt Catherine suits you better?'

'Oh yes, I like her better than I do my mother-in-law; but I do not seem to get on with either of them. That is why I stop up here by myself, because I am not at my ease with them. They seem to speak a different language, and all their friends are the same. I never know what to say to them. Sometimes I don't know how I am to go on living like this from day to day. I believe—though I don't dare tell Basil so—that I am pining to see George.'

'Ask him to take you to Holloway when he goes up to town next week.'

'I did ask him—I asked him more than once—but he always had some excuse ready. He seems hurt that I am wanting George so soon. "I will take you some day"—he always puts me off with that. I know as well as possible that he never means to ask George here.'

I was silent. I thought it likely that her supposition was correct. Mr. Basil would hardly care to introduce his brother-in-law. I wondered Aline had not the tact to see this for herself.

'Of course, I know George is not a gentleman, and that he would not be comfortable here. But when Basil was down on his luck he took us in and begrudged us nothing; and I say we ought to be grateful, and do something for George in return. What is the use of my writing to him, and Basil sending him game and fruit, and cases of wine?—as though Becky knew how to cook game! George would rather see me than have the finest present in the world. I told him that outright, but he doesn't seem to see it.'

'You must speak to him again.'

'Oh no; I am not one of the nagging sort, and I am not going to coax Basil against his will. I know how he would look all the time George was in the house: just as though we were martyring him; and if he were to put his knife to his mouth, when Bennett was in the room—and poor George would be as likely to do it as not—Basil would be in an agony. It is best to keep them apart. But how ever I am to go on living without ever seeing George I don't know. And there is Basil with all his friends round him, and that Mr. Fleming coming here next month—it is as much as ever I shall bring myself to be civil to him.'

I thought it better to let Aline talk on unchecked. I believe the secret of my influence with her lay in this: that I was too young and inexperienced to control her properly, and so she confided in me without reserve. I am sure now that, but for this outlet, things would have been much worse; for her undisciplined nature rebelled sadly against this ordered and conventional existence. She never interfered in any way with the ladies, never set herself up as mistress, or contradicted their orders; but she took no visible interest in the arrangements of her home, and never gave her opinion on any subject.

After due reflection, I took Aunt Catherine into confidence, and repeated this part of our conversation. Aunt Catherine listened to me rather sadly.

'Aline really wants her brother,' I finished.

'Yes; I know. I have already spoken to Basil, but the subject worries him terribly. He will not hear of Mr. Barton coming

here—he says he could not endure it—but he has promised to take Aline to Holloway.’

‘Ask him to do so quickly, and without delay.’

She looked up rather surprised at my serious manner.

‘There can be no real hurry, surely! Aline has only been with us a month—or is it five weeks?—and, as Basil says, there is no need for her to go often.’

‘I suppose she could not go alone?’

‘Oh no; Basil would not trust her,’ very quickly; ‘he never lets her go even for a walk alone. If you wish it, I will speak to him again, and see what is to be done; but I know Basil has a great many engagements, and there is the dinner-party next week;’ for a grand dinner-party was to be given at the Hall in honour of the young Squire, to be followed by a still larger one to the tenants. ‘I am afraid he will not take her until after that.’

‘No good comes of procrastination,’ I returned oracularly; but I was not thinking of Mr. Basil as I spoke, but of Hubert.

Kitty had not yet consulted a London physician, and it would be long before she would be fit to do so now. She had caught a severe chill on the very day she ought to have gone up to town. Hubert had started off to attend the clerical meeting, after leaving her a strict injunction to take a turn with the twins. She stopped out too long, and a shower came on, and, as they had only one umbrella between them, Kitty got wet through, and in her weakened and delicate condition she was unable to throw off her severe cold.

Hubert fretted and blamed himself and her; and then Dr. Langham came and scolded them both, and ordered Kitty to bed, where he told her she was likely to remain for the next week or two.

I thought he looked graver than usual when he came downstairs, though he pooh-poohed the question when I asked him if she were really ill; and, as Dr. Langham was rather touchy on professional matters, and seemed to consider his business was more with nurse than me, I could not press the point any more that day.

‘No good ever comes of procrastination,’ I had said, thinking sorrowfully of Kitty; but Aunt Catherine, who had no clue to my thoughts, seemed a little alarmed at my earnestness.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DINNER-PARTY AT THE HALL

'Beautiful faces are those that wear,
It matters little if dark or fair,
Whole-soul'd honesty printed there.
Beautiful lives are those that bless,
Silent rivers of happiness,
Whose hidden fountains but few possess.'

Anon.

'I am not mad—I would to heaven I were :
For then 'tis like I should forget myself.'

SHAKESPEARE.

I HAD not been included among the invited guests, as Aunt Catherine thought a girl of my age would feel strangely out of place among the older people ; but to our mutual vexation Aline chose to be offended because my name was not in the list.

'We cannot ask three from one house,' objected Aunt Catherine mildly ; 'and you see Mr. and Mrs. Leigh are both coming ;' for at that time we hoped Kitty would throw off her cold in a few days ; but, as it happened, I should have been obliged to accompany Hubert.

'It does not matter to me if Mrs. Leigh comes or not,' returned Aline obstinately. 'I have not spoken half a dozen words to her ; but if I am mistress of this house, as Basil is always saying, it seems hard I should not invite my own friends ; and if Olga is not to come to the dinner-party, I shall not put myself out about any one else ;' and of course, after this, Aunt Catherine was obliged to send me an invitation.

She pencilled a few lines on the card, urging my acceptance.

'Aline will be very much put out if you do not come. Tell Mrs. Leigh that she must bring you.'

I was somewhat in dismay at this new whim of Aline's, for I

felt it would involve me in unnecessary expense. The dinner-party would be a most brilliant affair, and all the best people in the county were coming. I had no dress fit for such an occasion, and I had already spent the greater part of my allowance. To my delight, I found Aunt Catherine had intuitively guessed at the real state of affairs, and was ready to enact the part of fairy godmother.

'Don't trouble your little head about such a trifle,' she said in her kind way. 'Mrs. Leigh is not fit to be worried just now; so I have settled it all with Marsden. If you will give her one of your dresses for a pattern, she will speak to Madame Hortense when she goes up to town next Wednesday. I made up my mind from the first that I would give you your dress. Why, what nonsense!' as I thanked her rather effusively. 'It is not the first time I have given you a present. We will keep it a secret from Aline, though; she was very curious this morning, and asked me what you were going to wear.'

I thought Madame Hortense's taste perfect when I opened the coffin-shaped box that contained my finery. The dress was soft white silk, and was trimmed with dainty finishes of lace; gloves and shoes of the most faultless description completed the toilette. Even Kitty raised her weary head from the pillow to wonder and admire.

'You will look like a bride, Olga! Surely you will have some deep-coloured flowers?' she observed; but I negatived this notion.

'Aunt Catherine likes me in white, and I shall wear the necklace she gave me;' and though she tried to combat this resolution, and suggested chrysanthemums and brown leaves, I adhered to my determination not to wear a single bud.

I had promised to go up to the Hall early to give my opinion on Aline's dress, and Hubert would follow me later. He was rather out of spirits, poor fellow! at the idea of leaving Kitty behind. He told me mournfully that it was the first time that he had ever gone out to dinner without her; and then he said that I looked very nice, and, after eyeing me through his spectacles with a great deal of attention, he continued with a sigh:

'Kitty wore a gown like yours the day we were married. Do you remember how pretty she looked, Olga, and what a colour she had when I took her into the vestry?' and then he wrapped me up carefully and put me into the old donkey-chair that we had borrowed for the occasion, and I saw him still standing there looking after us absently until we were out of sight. Poor

Hubert! I wished—I wished that he could have been a little less fond of Kitty!

I saw Bennett smile at my humble equipage as he assisted me to alight. Mrs. Basil was still in her room, he told me, so I ran up there at once.

On my way I encountered Aunt Catherine. She was quietly dressed as usual, but the black lace gown suited her. She gave me a quick approving glance. 'You will do very well, Olga,' she said, with a smile. 'Madame Hortense has just caught your style—it is simple and in good taste;' and then she passed on.

I knocked at Aline's door, and Marsden opened it. Aline was standing before the long pier-glass contemplating herself. She did not move or change her attitude in the least as I entered, but only looked at me rather seriously.

'Do you think I shall do, Olga?' she asked quickly. 'The dress is well enough; but what I want to know is whether I shall pass among all the fine folk downstairs.'

I did not answer for a moment. I was thinking I never saw a more beautiful creature, as she stood in that queenly attitude, with her white arms folded before her.

She had chosen the dress herself; it was green velvet, and it was trimmed at the neck with soft yellowish lace. A gold necklace, with an emerald pendant—one of the Sefton treasures—was clasped round her white, massive throat, but her arms were quite bare. She shook her head when Marsden offered her some bracelets.

'I don't want them. I don't feel like myself with a lot of jewellery. My mother-in-law may wear them herself—you can tell her so, Marsden. Well, Olga, why don't you speak? Do you think Basil will be satisfied with my appearance?'

But she must have read my answer in my eyes, for she gave a little laugh.

'He ought to be satisfied, Aline. I think you will be the grandest-looking woman in the room. Lady Harcourt is handsome—at least, all the county says so—but she will not hold a candle to you to-night.'

'What stuff!' she returned good-humouredly; but she was pleased with the flattery.

She looked at herself again to make sure that I was speaking the truth. I felt every one would endorse my opinion: the finely-shaped head with its coils of plaits; the tall, striking figure; the deep, brilliant eyes; the slow, graceful movements, would attract attention at once.

'You are right,' she observed tranquilly; 'I am not so bad,

after all. I wonder if George would know me? Do you know, Olga, I feel just as though I were acting a part—as they do in plays—to-night. I am not Allie—I am the Squire's lady. I wish you could write out the dialogue for me; it would be ever so much easier. I shall have to talk to Sir Henry Harcourt. Basil says he is to take me in to dinner. What do you suppose is likely to interest a baronet—eh, Olga?’

She was talking in a random way, as though she were excited. I wished Marsden were not there to hear her; but she was a discreet, trusty creature, and I knew she never repeated things.

‘You must let him talk to you; that will be best,’ I replied sagely; and then, to change the subject, for I was afraid of what she might say next, I continued: ‘But you have never admired my dress. It is Aunt Catherine’s gift, you know!’

‘It is very pretty,’ she returned carelessly. ‘What a childish little thing you look in it, Olga! But somehow I like it. Mind you keep near me when we go downstairs, and for mercy’s sake don’t leave me to my mother-in-law. Let us go down now, for I am just longing to see how Basil looks. Take care you don’t fall over my train!’

It was still early when we entered the drawing-room, and Mr. Basil was alone. He was standing before the fire with one arm on the mantelpiece, and seemed lost in thought. He started perceptibly as his eyes fell on his wife. She walked up to him half proudly, half shyly, trailing her long draperies behind her.

‘Shall I do, Basil?’

He moved slightly, and held her out at arm’s length; a puzzled expression came into his eyes.

‘I hardly knew you—I thought it was Lady Harcourt. She is your height. You look first-rate, Aline—doesn’t she, Miss Leigh?’ but he hardly looked at me as he spoke.

Aline blushed with pleasure. Those few words had fully repaid her for all her trouble.

‘You must tell Olga she looks nice, too,’ she said magnanimously; ‘you must not give me all the praise, Basil.’

He gave me a quick, keen glance that troubled me.

‘Miss Leigh does not want me to tell her that,’ he said. ‘She will have plenty of admirers this evening.’

And then Mrs. Lyndhurst came in, and Aunt Catherine followed her, and they both said kind things to Aline. I drew back into a corner.

I wished Mr. Basil had not made that foolish, flippant little speech. He must surely understand that I did not wish for compliments from him. Admirers! when no one in the whole

world cared for me except poor Harry! I felt a little hurt, and my beautiful dress did not console me in the least, for when one has friends one likes them to be simple and frank, and not to say silly things.

To my surprise, I saw Mr. Basil leave the fireside group, and the next minute he came to my corner.

'Are you typifying a snowdrop this evening, Miss Leigh,' he asked, with his old friendly smile, 'that you are hiding yourself away so humbly? Do you know, I have just heard some news that has pleased me greatly, and I want to share it with you. I have had a long letter from Mr. Fleming.'

'Yes.'

'The old vicar is dead, and they have offered him the living of St. Mark's. It is the very place for him. It is not a bad living, and the new Vicarage has just been finished. So the dear old man will be in clover.'

'I *am* glad!' with emphasis. 'Have you told Aunt Catherine?'

'No—not yet; there was no opportunity. Do you think she will be pleased?'

'Certainly she will. Mr. Fleming has always been poor, and——'

'But he will be rich now,' interrupting me; 'but, as he is not a married man, that does not matter.'

'He may marry still,' I returned; 'he is not really old, only fifty;' for I had leapt to this conclusion at once. My remark seemed to surprise Mr. Basil.

'He is not one of the marrying sort. I do not believe he has ever thought of it. What has put such an idea into your head?'

'It is a very likely idea,' I replied, rather provoked at this, for men are so dense in such matters; they never guess things as women do. 'Mr. Basil, don't you think Aline looks beautiful to-night?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' but he spoke coldly.

'She has taken such pains with herself, just to please you. I never saw any one so anxious, and yet she is not a bit vain.'

'No, she is not vain.'

'In my opinion, she will be the most beautiful woman in the room!'

'Possibly. Oh, there is Mr. Leigh! I must go and speak to him. Come with me;' but I refused to be tempted out of my corner. But the next moment Aline pounced on me.

'Do you call this keeping near me?' she said, rather indignantly. 'My mother-in-law was making me yawn as usual; I suppose that

is why ladies use their fans so much. What has Basil been talking to you about? I could see you both smiling. He hadn't much to say to me, in spite of all my finery.'

'He is perfectly satisfied with you,' was my diplomatic reply.

'Why, were you talking of me?' opening her eyes very wide. 'I never thought of that; but I believe you are quizzing me, and that you and Basil had secrets together.'

'No; nonsense!' rising rather hastily. 'There are the Harcourts, Aline, and your place is by your husband. He is looking for you; do go to him.'

'You must come too,' she returned decidedly.

Was she really nervous? I wondered. There was a touch of haughtiness in her manner as she acknowledged her guests' greeting, and for all her handsome looks she had very little to say to any one. Sir Henry, who was a voluble talker, did not seem to notice her silence.

During dinner I could hear his good-humoured voice and laugh, and see Aline's statue-like stillness, as she merely bent her head or made some monosyllabic reply. Poor Aline! after all, I fear her position was hardly a pleasant one. Towards the close of the evening, I noticed she grew paler and still more silent.

I was taken in to dinner by a lively Guardsman, a cousin of the Harcourts; he talked a great deal about the Black Forest, and seemed a pleasant and amusing person. I think he hardly knew at first how he was to interest a little country girl; but he struck out in the direction of the Black Forest, and, finding it answered, he stuck to it gallantly. I gave him a good deal of information in return about St. Croix, so we got on very well.

On our entering the drawing-room, Aline asked me his name.

'For you were just chattering like a couple of magpies,' she continued; 'and I wondered if he were an old friend of yours. I wish I could have tackled Sir Henry in that style; he must have thought Basil had a stupid sort of wife.'

It struck me that Aline was a little sulky; she kept aloof from the ladies, who were all crowding round the fire, and fanned herself in a discontented way. When the gentlemen came in, I saw her look eagerly at her husband, as though she wanted him to come and speak to her; but Mr. Basil was talking to Sir Henry, and passed her without a word.

Unfortunately, Captain Harcourt seemed determined to monopolise me again. He told me, in confidence, that he and I were the only young people in the room, and that we ought to have a fellow-feeling for each other.

'I was afraid they would send me in with some old dowager or

some sprightly maiden lady of uncertain age,' he went on ; ' but when Mr. Lyndhurst pointed you out, I felt a sudden exhilaration of spirits that has lasted me all the evening. It was not the champagne,' as I looked at him reprovingly, ' for, if you remember, I never tasted it.'

But, after all, this was not a fair specimen of his conversation, for he was really a most agreeable companion.

Hubert came up to me presently ; he wanted me to slip away without attracting notice—it was still early, and it would not do to break up the party : he would give Miss Sefton a hint, and she would understand that he was anxious to get back to Kitty. I obeyed him at once, and begged Captain Harcourt to take no notice ; there was a door near us. I thought Aline was still in the room, and hoped that she did not perceive my exit. Captain Harcourt would insist on coming into the hall to shake hands, but I sent him back peremptorily.

I might have to wait some minutes for Hubert, as he would have to watch for an opportunity to speak to Aunt Catherine. Some one with a fine tenor voice was singing 'The River of Years.' I could hear the refrain as I crossed the hall to fetch my fur-lined cloak. I hummed the last line softly to myself, 'And we must be ready to meet the tide.' Ah, that was the difficulty—to be ready when the time came !

I was passing the half-closed door of the dining-room, when I heard a slight movement within, and thinking it was Bennett, I went in to ask him for a glass of water ; to my surprise it was Aline. She was standing by the sideboard, with her back to the door. What could she be doing ? The next moment I saw her raise a wine-glass to her lips, and drain the contents. The sight turned me sick, and for a few seconds I stood rooted to the spot. She had the decanter in her hand, and was refilling her glass, when I sprang forward and caught her arm.

'Aline !' I exclaimed, in a shocked voice ; 'what can you be thinking about ? For Heaven's sake put that decanter down !'

She tried to laugh it off.

'Goodness me, how you startled me, you tiresome girl ! I thought it was Bennett ; the servants are always poking about when one least expects them. What on earth makes you look so scared ? I suppose a person may help herself to a glass of sherry in her own house.'

She was trying to brave it out, but she had the grace to look ashamed of herself.

'But not you,' I panted. 'Oh, Aline ! how can you be so wicked, when you promised ? You know you promised your

husband that you would never touch anything but water again ! Oh, I know ; Aunt Catherine told me so.'

'People cannot always remember a promise,' she returned crossly. 'I wish you would not make such a fuss about a trifle ; it is not your business, you know. I was so nervous that I could not touch a morsel at dinner ; and I was nearly sick with that horrid, sinking feeling. I feel quite different now. A little pick-me-up, as George says, was all I wanted. And I will go back to the drawing-room now, if you like.'

'Yes, come—come directly,' for I noticed that she gave a lingering glance at the glass she had half filled.

'It is no use to leave that,' she muttered ; and before I could prevent her, it was emptied.

'Now, then,' she said coolly ; but as she replaced the glass Mr. Basil came into the room.

I shall never forget the look of disgust and horror that came over his face when he saw the glass in Aline's hand. She saw it too. Her temper rose immediately.

'Why are you prying on me like this ?' she said angrily. 'One would think you and Olga were my keepers. You are looking as though you would like to strike me, just because I helped myself to a glass of wine. You would sooner see me faint than let me have a drop, I know !'

'I would sooner see you dead !' he returned with suppressed passion. 'Aline, how dare you break your promise to me ? You will have to answer to me for this.'

'I generally have to answer to you, don't I ? No woman had a more bitterly hard taskmaster. But I am not going to talk to you to-night, or to Olga either. You may both go back to your fine friends and tell them I am taken ill. Perhaps you would like to lock me up in my own room first ? He did that once, Olga, only George came and let me out.'

I never saw anything more terribly tragic than her face and voice as she stood there in her velvet dress, with her white gleaming neck and arms, and that defiant look in her eyes. It was as though the devil had entered into her. I could not bear the sight, or to hear her speaking to him in that fierce, mocking tone. I could not be silent. I put my arms round her, and prayed her to desist.

'Do not speak so, Aline ; to-morrow you will be sorry that you have made him so unhappy. Come away with me, dear ; I will take care of you ; no one shall talk to you to-night. Let me go with her, Mr. Basil ; I will help her, poor thing !'

The tears were running down my face as I spoke, for it was

too much to see him standing there looking so white and hopeless. He did not speak, only drew back to let us pass. As Aline yielded to my entreaties, I took her to her room, and after a little while she consented to undress and go to bed. Her passion seemed to die away the moment she lost sight of her husband's reproachful face; she even thanked me in a subdued voice for my services.

I stayed with her until I thought she would sleep, and then I went downstairs. All the guests were gone, and only Aunt Catherine and Mr. Basil were in the drawing-room.

'Has Hubert gone too?' I asked, looking round.

'Yes, dear. He was anxious about his wife, so Basil said he would take you home later. It is a fine night, and if you wrap up well you will come to no harm.'

'Oh no; but I am sorry to take Mr. Basil out.'

'There is no need to be sorry about such a trifle,' he returned gravely.

And then Aunt Catherine helped me on with my wraps, and whispered to me that I had been very kind, and that I must come to-morrow, early, and then I joined Mr. Basil in the dark avenue.

I thought he was never going to speak to me, and I feared to address him. But as we turned into the road he said, in a constrained voice:

'I hope you do not think me uncivil to-night, Miss Leigh; but I feel as though I cannot talk.' And then he added hurriedly: 'I have had a blow.'

'Yes, I know. Please do not treat me as a stranger; I would rather be silent too;' and then we walked on, and nothing was said until we reached Fircroft.

I had shaken hands with him, and was about to leave him, but he called me back.

'I haven't thanked you,' he said hoarsely, and rather indistinctly. 'You know I haven't thanked you for what you have done to-night.'

'Because I have done nothing,' I replied, trying to speak cheerfully, 'and no thanks are due, Mr. Basil,' for he was looking at me very strangely. 'I want to ask you one thing—will you try to forgive Aline this once?'

He remained silent. It was not possible for him to tell a lie. In his heart he knew he had not forgiven her.

'Please—please be kind to her; she knows she has done wrong. To-morrow she will be sorry for having grieved you.'

'How long will her sorrow last, do you think?'

'I cannot tell. But, Mr. Basil, think it is until seventy times seven. Will you not get her to make another promise, and help her to keep it?'

'I will try,' he returned briefly, but he could not trust himself to say more; the iron of his degradation had entered into his soul.

I could read his hopelessness in his tone. There was a set, stern look on his face as he turned away. But he had said he would try, and I knew he would keep his word.

I was so wretched that night that I cried myself to sleep. Oh, the terrible mystery of those fettered souls whom Satan has bound, who are expiating, perhaps, the sins of former generations, in whose blood there is some hereditary taint! I shuddered as I recalled that scene—Aline standing there in the pride of her beauty, and the unholy light of a fierce longing in her eyes! It seemed to me as though the pit were opening before me—as though unhallowed spirits were thronging round their victim, triumphing over the weak undisciplined will. O God! what need for us to pray daily, 'Lead us not into temptation'! Us—not me; us—our frail and tempted brothers; our sisters trembling on the brink of ruin—our sorrow-stricken sinful ones! I wept bitterly as I whispered the clause over and over again God help them! God help them both!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

‘IF I WERE ONLY LIKE YOU!’

‘There is nothing in this world can make me joy.
Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale,
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man.’

King John.

‘You have been as God’s good angel in our house.
God bless you for it, God reward you for it.’

Enoch Arden.

I TURNED my steps very reluctantly in the direction of the Hall the next morning. On my way I encountered Mr. Basil. He was riding Ladybird, and his new retriever, Rolf, was running beside him. He just lifted his hat as he passed, but took no further notice; and the next minute he had galloped out of sight.

Marsden was coming down the avenue on an errand to the village. She stopped to tell me that Mrs. Basil was not very well. She was lying down in the Lady’s Room, and had given strict injunctions that no one but Miss Olga was to go to her; she had slept badly, and complained of neuralgic pains in her head.

I found her lying on a couch, drawn up to the fire, in her ruby plush tea-gown. It was a dull, gloomy day, but the Lady’s Room looked warm and cosy. I could see at once that she had been crying; her eyes were much swollen, and she looked altogether ill and subdued. As her head ached, she had unfastened her heavy plaits, and I noticed they reached to her knee. I could not help commenting on their length.

‘Oh, my hair has always given me plenty of trouble,’ she said languidly; ‘but now I have a maid to help me, I do not mind so much. When I was with George, I used to roll it up anyhow. George grumbled sometimes. He pretended to be proud of my hair—but, there! don’t let us talk of George. Take off your hat, and draw up that easy-chair where I can see you.’

'I am so sorry your head aches so badly.'

'What does it signify—headache or heartache? I have got them both. I did not sleep a wink last night. I know what that means. I told Basil so. But he is downright cruel! He won't let me have a drop of chloral! I told him George let me have it sometimes, just to quiet me, and he said more shame to him for giving in to my whims. Olga, I don't want to grumble about Basil—poor old fellow!—for he has been as nice as possible this morning; only it is like moving a rock, trying to change his mind when he has once made it up.'

'Has he been sitting with you?'

'Yes, for a long time. He found me crying because I was low and wretched about last night; so, instead of scolding me as he generally does, he sat down and talked to me. He made me tell him how much I had taken—but it was only three glasses, not a drop more—and then he said how he had felt ready to sink into the ground with shame and vexation at seeing me so weak, and that he felt worse about it because you were there to see it all. Olga, he thinks a deal about you—I can see that—but I am not going to be jealous. You were like a little white angel to me last night; and when you came and put your arms round me, and said you would take care of me, I felt as though the devil was leaving me!'

'Aline,' I said, kneeling down beside her, 'you will never grieve your husband so again? You are going to be good? You will be good, will you not?'

A distressed look came into her beautiful eyes; it was almost a look of fear.

'I don't know,' she whispered. 'I told Basil I would try. I would have told him anything to give him comfort, poor boy! But I cannot trust myself.'

'Why not, dear?'

'Oh, what a question!' throwing herself back on her pillows. 'What a child you are, Olga, to ask such a thing! But, there! I cannot expect either you or Basil to understand me—only George does.'

'Will you try to make me understand? I do so want to help you.'

'So does Basil—he told me so; and there were tears in his eyes; and yet he is not a soft sort either. He said there was nothing he would not do for me, if I only kept straight; that he would be fond of me, and stay with me, if only I would not shame him before his people. It made me cry to hear him; and then I promised over again.'

'Oh, I am so glad——'

But she stopped me impatiently.

'There is nothing to be glad about. I have made promises before, and broken them, as I did last night. Oh, Olga! don't you see what I mean? When I am sane—when the devil is not tempting me—I think I can keep my promise easily. I won't notice the craving. I hate the very sight of the poisonous stuff! I wonder how I can ever bear the smell of it. And then, in a minute, it is all up with me, and I must have it though I die for it! It is madness! I have often told George so, and I know he believes me. But Basil won't let me say the word. With all his kindness, he is hard. He says many a man has fought a fiercer battle and conquered, and that it is my will that is weak.'

I found it impossible to answer her. I had no experience. I only knew she was in deadly danger, and that we must save her in spite of herself. Madness or sin, she must be saved! I asked her, almost humbly, how we could best help her.

'By being kind to me,' she returned, without a moment's hesitation. 'I am wretched enough without people giving me more to bear. I asked Basil this morning if he would let me go to George for a little, but he won't hear of it. He says George spoils me, and that I had better stop with him.'

'Would you not rather be with your husband, Aline?'

But she flushed almost painfully at the question.

'I like being with Basil, of course. What a question! As though a woman doesn't care to be with her husband! But if I make him unhappy, I would rather go away. Oh!'—as a great tear rolled down her cheek—'if I were only like you, Olga! If he could look up to me and respect me as he does you, there would be some chance of happiness for us. But I have worn out his love, and I cannot bear the thought that he only pities and tolerates me. It drives me crazy sometimes, and then I quarrel with him.'

'But, all the same, you must not leave him.'

'Who said I meant to leave him?' looking at me oddly. 'You need not get notions in your head. If you were my friend, you would ask him to let me stay with George for a bit; he would listen to you, and he only gets angry with me if I propose it.'

'Indeed, I could not speak to him on such a subject. What would he think of such interference on my part?'

'Oh, very well, then; I won't say any more,' rather wearily. 'I ought not to expect people to take so much trouble about me, only I was afraid Basil was making a mistake, and that we should both suffer in the end for it; but it can't be helped.'

This speech did not tend to make me more comfortable, but I

thought it wiser to take no notice; so I spoke of other things. I contrived to interest her at last, and the rest of the morning passed more pleasantly. By Aunt Catherine's wish I had remained to luncheon, and I did not leave Aline until six. She was feeling much better by that time, and promised to go down to dinner as usual. We had Reggie in, and played with him; and she was in a far more comfortable frame of mind when I left her.

I found Aunt Catherine alone in the drawing-room, and I took the opportunity of stating Aline's wish to go to her brother.

She told me at once that Mr. Basil was much against it.

'We were talking about it last night when Basil came back from Fircroft,' she said, 'and he told me Aline had been speaking about it. He gave me his reasons. He declares Mr. Barton spoils her; that he is so fond of her that he often gives way to her whims and fancies; and that—that is why she liked to be with him.'

'It is natural that she should like to be with her brother, especially when he has been so good to her.'

'Yes; but, Olga, you do not quite grasp the situation. Basil says that Mr. Barton is too busy to watch or control her properly. More than once she has eluded him and Becky. You see, Mr. Barton is in the shop, and Becky downstairs; and Basil says she is safer here.'

'Of course he may be right.'

'I think we are bound to leave the matter to him. If Basil has ever failed in his duty, he is certainly making up for it now. Even Aline tells me how kind he is to her. We ought not to find fault with him because he is unwilling to trust her out of his sight.'

'I hope you do not think me interfering?' I stammered; but she only laughed at this.

'I never think anything to your discredit; but, Olga, you must not be too anxious. I am afraid, when I look at you, that we are burdening you too much with our worries. You are losing your blooming looks. I sometimes think you are not quite so cheerful as my little companion of *La Maissonnette*.'

I disclaimed this notion rather hotly, and with a fine flow of words; but finally I did own that my divided duties were troubling me—that I felt I was neglecting Kitty: 'Even nurse complains that I am no good to her—and I was always nurse's right hand; and now Kitty is ill, Mab and Jessie are running wild.'

'Yes, I see. We have been very selfish, I am afraid; but the dear little girls shall not be sacrificed. You shall stay at home, Olga, and do your duty, and I will talk to Aline. Perhaps you

could spare an hour late in the afternoon just to keep my troublesome niece in a good temper. Do you think that could be managed?' looking at me inquiringly.

'Oh yes,' I returned cheerfully; 'I could easily spare the hour after the schoolroom tea. Hubert generally sits with Kitty then.' And so it was arranged, and I went home with a lighter heart, feeling that Aunt Catherine would do her best for me.

I was very thankful that we had come to this understanding, for the next day Kitty was so much worse that I could not have left her, and my hands were so full with her and the children that I had not a spare minute. And when the afternoon closed in, I had to take my place in Kitty's room instead of running up to the Hall for the hour's chat with Aline. I sent her a little note, and begged her to come and see me instead, for I feared that I should be kept in the following day; but she took no notice of this, and we did not meet for three whole days.

When at last I found my way to her room, she received me so coldly that I was quite hurt. I thought she looked dull and out of humour. She was lying on her couch with a novel in her hand, but she did not seem to be reading. She turned her cheek to me—she had never kissed me yet—but did not ask me to take off my hat. I sat down on the rug, and asked what she had been doing.

'Doing? there is not much to do in this place,' she said fretfully. 'Basil has been wanting me to take walks with him; but I am not fond of muddy lanes, and roads with nothing in them, and I am getting sick of driving. I do think the country in November is perfectly deadly; and there is Basil shooting, and riding, and playing tennis, and can't find his day long enough! No wonder he feels sleepy just when I am most wide awake, and want him to play cards or do something amusing!'

'Country people are not fond of sitting up late; and I know of old that Mr. Basil is an early riser.'

'Yes; and he wants to persuade me to be an early riser, too. "No, thank you," I said to him; "the day is twice too long already, and there is no need to lengthen it." Why, he is out and about with Reggie long before I can bring myself to think of getting up. Actually my mother-in-law was lecturing me yesterday, and telling me I ought to be more with Basil. "He has enough of me already," was my answer; for I wasn't in the best of humours. I had been asking Basil to take me to Brighton for a week or two, just to see a bit of life, and what do you think was his objection? He did not like to leave his mother so soon. Did you ever hear anything so ridiculous?'

'I can understand Mr. Basil would be reluctant to leave her. You can see for yourself how happy she is.'

'Oh yes ; she is happy enough, and so are they all. It is only poor me who is always in the way. You are getting tired of me, too, Olga. I always tired every one but George.'

George, always George ! how she harped on that one string ! Was it affection, or mere contrariness, that made her dwell on this one thought ? She made more than one reproachful speech about my leaving her for three days, and I could not get her to sympathise with my home troubles ; in fact, she was very unsatisfactory altogether.

I kept my promise to Aunt Catherine, and, when it was possible, spent at least an hour daily with Aline.

I never saw Mr. Basil, except at church ; I got it into my head that he avoided me. He was often in the house when I paid my visit, but he never came near his wife's room. Once I heard him playing in the nursery with Reggie, and another time he was crossing the hall to the library ; but I could not find out whether he had seen me or not.

Aunt Catherine used to come to Fircroft when she wanted me. She said there was no other place where she could talk to me quietly.

Mr. Fleming had paid his promised visit, but had only remained three days. Aunt Catherine said very little about him, except that Aline had been usually sulky, and had remained in her own room, and not all her husband's entreaties could induce her to be friendly with Mr. Fleming. When she dined with them she scarcely opened her lips.

I was not satisfied about Aline. Her moodiness continued ; she never seemed glad to see me now, or pressed me to remain ; and when business prevented me from paying my daily visit, she never came to Fircroft, or questioned me as to the reason of my absence. I could not find out what she did with herself all day ; and Aunt Catherine's account was most unsatisfactory. She said Mr. Basil was worried to death, and that Aline was trying him dreadfully. She found fault with everything he did ; she would not be civil to his friends, and several of the best people were offended because she refused to see them. She grumbled if her husband went out shooting or riding, and complained that she was always alone ; and yet if he gave up his amusements to stay with her, she could not be induced to do anything. She had taken it into her head lately that she was out of health, and wanted sea-air and tonics ; but Dr. Langham had told them privately that it was nothing but ennui. He wanted her to ride, and play tennis—

do anything, in fact, but sit over novels and fancy-work in a hot room. She had been very angry, and had quarrelled with him, declaring that she would die before she sent for him again; and that day she had frightened them all dreadfully, for she had actually gone off to Brighton by herself for a few hours.

'If she had not encountered Reynolds in the station and told him where she was going, we should have been seriously alarmed,' went on Aunt Catherine; 'as it was, Basil had a shooting party, and did not come in until five. Aline only returned an hour later. We had sent the carriage to meet all the trains. Basil was very angry; but he could not make the least impression on her. She was most provoking, told him Dr. Langham had ordered her air and exercise, and that she had had a fine blow on the Parade, and had amused herself looking at the shops, and she would not promise him not to do it again. Basil made himself quite wretched about it; he said she had just done it to vex him, and how could he be sure that she had not begun her old habits again? Her rushing off in this way looked like it, and he thought from her manner that she was very much excited.'

I saw Aline the next day, and she gave me her own version of the matter.

'I was in a temper, I know,' she said frankly; 'that Dr. Langham had put me out, making Basil believe it was just my fancy and nothing else; but I should like them both to feel as I do for a few hours—they would be ready to wish themselves dead, I believe. I had not thought of Brighton till I was close to the station, for I was so mad with them all that I had walked out of the house; and then, all at once, I thought I would have a bit of a spree, as George calls it, so I took my ticket—but I had the grace to tell Reynolds where I was going. It was a beautiful afternoon, and I quite enjoyed myself. The shops were getting ready for Christmas, so I bought some things for Reggie, and walked down the Esplanade, looking at all the fine carriages. I would not walk on King's Road at last because folks stared so; and I got a cup of coffee and a sandwich, and felt ever so much better. There was a fine fuss with Basil when I got back. I asked him at last if men generally kept their wives in leading-strings. He was not over-polite in his reply; but I had had my fun, and didn't care. What are you looking grave about, Olga? Of course you side with Basil—you always do!'

I let this pass, and only told her quietly that it was unkind on her part to give them such a fright; if she had not met Reynolds, no one would have known what to think.

'What should they think, but that I was amusing myself?'

she returned, staring at me. 'I am not a child to be run over, and I don't want a nurse with me. I tell you what it is, Olga: Basil does not trust me out of his sight; he wants to keep me a sort of prisoner here. I may drive about with my mother-in-law or Aunt Catherine, or I may walk with him or Marsden; but I must not go a yard beyond the gate by myself. Now, do you suppose I am going to stand that? I am so nervous now that I could get into a passion at a minute's notice. My life is too dull. I tell Basil so, but he won't listen to me; and now you're neglecting me, and I haven't a creature to amuse me.'

'Oh, Aline! what am I to do?' I replied, much distressed at this selfish remark. 'Do you know, dear Kitty is really very ill; her lungs are affected, and Dr. Langham wants her to go to Cannes. Hubert is in a dreadful way; he would never believe it was anything but weakness and a bad cold, and now he means to have a physician down from London to see her.'

'She has always been delicate, hasn't she?' but there was not much sympathy in Aline's tone.

'No, only latterly; but now we are all very anxious. Jem came home yesterday, and he says he is quite shocked at the alteration in her; but he did not tell Hubert so. It takes all nurse's time waiting on her, and everything else devolves on me. Jane helps in the nursery; but with Jem at home and the pupils, there is so much to be done: it will be a sad Christmas for us all.'

'Yes, I suppose so.' She looked at me attentively, and then looked away again. 'I think I shall hate Christmas more than usual this year. My mother-in-law is making such a fuss about it already. There is to be a tree for Reggie, and a children's party, and a supper to the villagers, and I don't know what beside; and, after that, Basil is going to Leeds, and he wants me to go, too.'

'That will be very nice,' I observed; but she shook her head with a strange smile.

'I am not going. I told him so at once. "You need not expect to have my company," I said to him; "and, what is more, you do not want it—you will be a deal more comfortable without me." For, you see, I could not forget he had refused to take me to Brighton. He chose to be put out about it, and told me that "I was the worst wife a man could have, and that I would do nothing to please him." My lord was quite in a huff about it—what! are you going already?' for I was too much out of patience to listen to her any longer.

How could she treat him so? would not any husband resent

such inconsiderate behaviour? I was fast losing all hope of Aline; an evil spirit still dominated her—I could see that plainly.

I was just crossing the hall, when I saw Mr. Basil. He had just come in from shooting, and was warming himself before the big fireplace. He came forward and shook hands with me rather gravely. I had not seen him for a week or two, and I noticed a worn, harassed look on his face.

He began by telling me that he had been walking home with Jem.

'I am sorry to hear such a bad account of Mrs. Leigh,' he said kindly.

'We are all terribly anxious about her,' I returned, in a low voice.

'I do not wonder. I must come and see Mr. Leigh. I have—I have been too busy to call lately.'

'Please do not trouble about it; Aunt Catherine comes nearly every day.'

'And Aline?'

'Oh no! Aline never comes. I do not think she likes paying calls; I have asked her so often.'

'You must think it strange after all your kindness to her. I am afraid you have spoilt her—she misses your visits terribly—do you not think so?' looking at me so anxiously that I knew he meant something else. 'Do you not think her changed for the worse?' would have been nearer his meaning.

'Yes, I think so. Aline is certainly not in good spirits.'

'Are you in good spirits? Am I, for the matter of that? But you and I do our best to struggle against depression; but Aline will not make an effort. I do not know what will become of us if she will not try to be happier. But, there! I will not keep you listening to my grumbling; you are worried enough without that. Take care of yourself, for all our sakes;' and he shook hands again very warmly.

The kindness and sympathy in his look and tone made up for Aline's indifference, and I went home more cheered. Kitty was a trifle better that evening, and Jem and I had a long talk, and altogether things were more comfortable.

The next day I was busier than ever. Harry and Mr. Campbell were leaving in the afternoon, and Mr. Cunningham was to follow the next morning. There was no possibility of seeing Aline. Mr. Basil came in the afternoon and remained a long time with Hubert, but I only saw him for a minute. He was going over to Lewes on business the next day, he said, and should not be home until late. If I could spare an hour to sit with

Aline he should be grateful; but I was not to inconvenience myself.

I made up my mind that I would go at all hazards. I was thankful that I went, for Aline was much nicer to me. She received me kindly; told me I looked pale and must have a good rest. I did not think she looked well herself, but she did not complain. She was sleeping badly, that was all, she said; but it was no use telling Basil so, for he would not let her have a sleeping-draught, so she must just suffer. There was a weary, heavy look in her eyes that did not belie her words.

But she was not inclined to talk about herself. Contrary to her usual custom, she asked for Reggie to come in, and she seemed so occupied with him that I was not obliged to exert myself.

I cannot remember that she said one sharp thing during my visit. Even when Reggie clambered up on my lap and refused to leave me for her, she only smiled sadly.

'He has liked you best from the first,' she said gently. 'Reggie has taken a wonderful fancy to you;' and she leant back in her chair and looked at us both in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.

I whispered to Reggie to go and give her a kiss, but he refused. 'I will kiss my Dear instead,' he said, in his pretty, wilful way. We were spoiling our darling among us.

'Let him be, Olga,' she said, with a sigh. 'I don't want Reg to be ordered to kiss me. He has plenty to love him—haven't you, Reg?'

Emma came in presently to fetch him, and then, as it was getting late, I rose to go, but Aline made me sit down again.

'Give me a few more minutes,' she said quite beseechingly. 'I don't seem to like to part with you to-night. I haven't been nice to you lately, have I, Olga?'

I laughingly disclaimed this, but she shook her head.

'You are too good-hearted to tell me so, but I know I have been detestable. I haven't been Allie at all. I was just the Squire's lady; and somehow the character did not fit me; the velvet gown wasn't so magical, after all.'

She sighed—such a weary sigh it was!—and went on:

'If I had known you before, Olga—if we had been sisters—it might have been different.'

'But you have a good husband,' I remonstrated, for it struck me that she undervalued her blessings.

'Yes; but Basil is too high; I can't reach him. We were never intended for each other; I see that now. He wanted a different sort of woman to help him along. There! I won't talk

any more. I am a bit low to-night, and I know you are fidgeting to be off ;' and then, as I stooped over her, she put up her face and kissed me for the first time—a long, lingering kiss.

'Good-bye, dear,' she said very gently.

'If she were always as nice as she has been to-day !' I thought, as I went down the dark avenue. 'And yet how unhappy she seemed !' And then I stopped and looked back.

The Hall door was open, for Bennett had insisted on watching me down the avenue, because, as he said, the big trees made it so lonesome. A flood of warm, soft radiance streamed out into the darkness. How could any one be unhappy who called that home ? I said to myself, for I loved every stone and tree about the place. A chime rang out through the frosty air—the ringers were practising for Christmas. Over my head the stars were shining in the dark wintry sky. As I passed the lodge I could hear the children singing carols. It would not be a happy Christmas at Fircroft with its mistress ill upstairs.

I did not see Aline the next day ; I was often obliged to omit my daily visit now. We had callers all the afternoon, and one of them stayed so late that there was only just time to dress for dinner. I determined to go earlier the following afternoon, and to take Wilfred with me to play with Reggie.

I rose with this idea. I was just finishing dressing, and Mab and Jessie were reading their morning psalm, verse by verse, as they always did, with Kitty, when nurse brought me a note from Aunt Catherine. It was very short :

'MY DEAR OLGA,

'Will you come round directly you have finished breakfast ? I want to see you particularly.

'Yours,

'CATHERINE SEFTON.'

It was certainly very inconvenient to be summoned away so unceremoniously. My absence would interfere with the children's lessons, for I had now resumed them regularly. I begged Mab and Jessie, in Jem's hearing, to go on with their practising and needlework until I returned, but to my surprise he offered to take my place.

'I will look after the youngsters,' he said good-naturedly ; 'there is evidently something up ; Aunt Catherine seems flurried.'

I asked why he thought so, and he returned promptly :

'Well, she has not crossed her *t*'s or dotted her *i*'s ; so it is pretty evident that she is in some fix or other.'

CHAPTER XXXIX

‘YOU MUST TAKE CARE OF ME, GEORGE!’

‘But I had not so much of man in me,
And all my mother came into my eyes,
And gave me up to tears.’

Henry V.

‘Mine eyes

Were not in fault, for she was beautiful.’

Cymbeline.

JEM’s shrewd remark only added to my uneasiness, and as soon as I could leave the breakfast table I ran across to the Hall. I thought Bennett looked a little mysterious as he admitted me, and I fancied there was something ominous in the way he told me that Miss Sefton was alone in the library.

Aunt Catherine was sitting by the fire reading her business letters; she spoke to me in her usual manner, but I saw at once that she looked harassed and worried; as she held my hand, she said quietly:

‘We are all much troubled, Olga, and you will be grieved to hear the reason—Aline has left us!’

‘Aunt Catherine, what can you mean?’

‘She went away last night; she has gone back to her brother’s. She left a letter for Basil—he wishes me to show it to you;’ and without another word she put it into my hand.

I was too much shocked to speak; somehow, I had never expected anything like this. Aline’s handwriting was very clear and legible; the letter was evidently written with some degree of haste. It began abruptly:

‘You must not be angry, Basil, when you hear that I have gone away and left you and Reggie. I am doing it for your good as well as my own. Things could not go on much longer as they have been going on, and so I thought it best to settle matters for

myself. I have asked you over and over again to let me go to George for a bit, but you would never listen to me. You were always too masterful with me, and treated me like a child, as though I did not know what I wanted; but I was serious all along, and now I am going back to George, and it was a pity I ever left him, for I am not fit to lead your life, and the dulness of it is just killing me.

'Of course, you will be blaming me, and saying I am the worst wife any man could have, and I daresay it is the truth; but, for all that, you must not think I have not tried. Olga knows that I have. For a little bit I thought I could make myself happy—all the fine things pleased me, and I liked being with you and Reggie; but I soon found out my mistake. You were always too high, and expected too much of me; and I could not get on with your people, and no one seemed to understand me but Olga, and she was always good as gold to me. I am sorry that I am to say good-bye to Olga.

'But, Basil, you need not complain of me too much, for, except that once when I was over-excited, I have kept myself straight—I have indeed; and I never tasted anything but coffee the day I went to Brighton. I will tell you the truth about that: I told the girl to bring me a glass of sherry, and, just as I was taking it out of her hand, I thought of you, and I put it down on the table, and said I would rather have the coffee; and I never tasted it, though the longing for it drove me out of the shop at last. And when you were so angry with me for my spree, I thought I had not done so badly, after all.

'But I could not keep it up, and that is why I am going to George, for I can't trust myself any longer, and I might disgrace you. You have had enough to bear, poor fellow! and you and Reg, bless his dear little heart! will be better without me—I have known that all along, only it is not so easy to say good-bye.

'Now, Basil, you must mind what I say, and not come near me, for I am going to stop with George. I am tired of wishing you had not married me; but you are not the only one who has made a mistake and lived to repent it, and we must just do the best we can for each other. And so God bless you! ALINE.

'P.S.—Give my love to Olga, and tell her not to fret. I was never worth the trouble she took with me.'

'What do you think of it, Olga?'

'I think'—but I could hardly speak for crying—'I think that her heart was half broken before she could bring herself to write that letter.'

'Yes, but Basil is unhappy, too. Think of the painful position in which she has placed him. He says this is worse to him than anything, that he will not be able to face people—you know how proud and sensitive he is. If she had never come to the Hall, of course things would not be so difficult for him. I see that plainly. One thing—he is determined to have her back.'

'But if she will not come?'

'That is where we shall need your help. Basil spoke of you at once. He wants you to go with me, and try and bring her to a sense of her duty. He is so angry that he dare not trust himself to speak to her; but he says, if she will only come back, he will not utter a word of reproach.'

'Do you mean that we are to go to-day?'

'No; not until Monday or Tuesday. Basil thinks it will be better to leave her quiet for a few days; but he has written to her. He brought his letter to show me: it was very short, and said very little; but she will see how hurt he is. He told her that he hoped she would soon see things in a different light, and remember that he had a right to be considered. It was a very temperate, sensible letter; but he says she always misunderstands him.'

'Do you think she had better come back, Aunt Catherine?'

'Don't ask for my opinion; I am perfectly hopeless; we must just do as Basil wishes. He has a right, as he says, to control his own wife. I have not given you his message. He begs you to do this kindness for him, as no one else has so much influence over Aline. We are to tell her that he will overlook her imprudent step; but that she must come back to him. She may stop with Mr. Barton, if she likes, for two or three weeks, and then he will go and fetch her; but she must not remain so long away that people will wonder at it—he does so dread any of his friends getting hold of this.'

'You have not told me yet how she left the Hall.'

'No; I forgot. Let me see, you did not come yesterday, and Marsden says she was looking for you all the afternoon; and she had Reggie with her until he went to bed. Basil was out shooting with Colonel Trafford all day, and did not get home till six. When he went upstairs to dress for dinner, he just looked in on Aline; she was lying on the couch in her tea-gown, and told him she had a headache, and should not come down to dinner. The room was almost dark, he said, for the fire was low, and he did not see her plainly; he wanted to ring for coals, but she would not let him. Only, just as he was going away, she called him back, and asked him to kiss her. He was a little surprised at that, for she had

lately been so cold in her manner to him; but, of course, he kissed her at once, and told her that he should come up and sit with her after dinner.'

'Well?' for Aunt Catherine paused here.

'Of course that was all he saw of her. When he went up he only found the room empty, and the letter lying on the table. She must have changed her dress and slipped out the garden way while we were at dinner. Reynolds felt a draught as he was bringing out the game, and discovered the side-door was wide open. We have no doubt that she took the eight o'clock train to town, but Basil did not dare to make any inquiries.'

'Was Mrs. Lyndhurst very much upset?'

'Yes, but only on Basil's account. You know she rather dislikes Aline than otherwise. Aline has always repelled her from the first, though she tried so hard to be kind to her. Well, it is a miserable business; but we shall do no good talking about it. I think Tuesday will be soon enough to go to Holloway. Will you hold yourself in readiness for that day?'

'I am glad you did not say Wednesday. The physician is coming down that afternoon.'

'No, we will say Tuesday. Thank you, my dear. Then that is settled, and I will tell Basil so. Now I must answer my letters, so I need not hinder you any more. If possible, we intend to say nothing of Aline's absence for a day or two, so I must ask you to be cautious.'

'I must not even tell Jem?'

'No, I think not.'

I was a little sorry for this restriction, for Jem was such a safe person, but happily his sense of honour prevented him from asking me any troublesome questions. If he was disappointed at my want of confidence, he certainly did not tell me so, only he was kinder than usual all that day, as though he knew I was worried.

I did not see Mr. Basil the next day; he was not at church either in the morning or evening. I heard afterwards that he had walked over to Folgate for both services. I did not go up to the Hall on Monday, but in the afternoon Jem and I encountered him in the village. He did not stop to speak, only passed on with a muttered greeting. I hoped Jem did not notice how embarrassed he seemed; he quite flushed up, and scarcely looked at us. But Jem said nothing, only called off Rollo, who was sniffing rather aggressively at the butcher's dog.

We left Brookfield by a very early train on Tuesday. I think Aunt Catherine wanted people to believe that she was only going for a long day's shopping. She said Mr. Basil seemed very low

that morning ; but she did not talk much about him or any one else. I think in her heart she dreaded our errand as much as I did, for we both knew how stubborn Aline could be when she chose.

It seemed to me a long time before we reached Holloway. I took a great dislike to the place, and wondered how Aline could bear such a sordid life after she had had a glimpse of better things. But I thought it better to keep these reflections to myself, and it was not easy to understand a nature like hers. I have made up my mind since that she fled to it as a sort of refuge ; that the fear of disgracing her husband was the strongest feeling with her then, and drove her to take this singular step.

I shrank behind Aunt Catherine as we entered the dark little shop. A tall young man behind the counter was serving a couple of women : when Aunt Catherine asked where Mr. Barton was, he pointed to the parlour, and went on weighing out the tea. He was a pale, weak-eyed young man, and I thought he looked after us rather oddly as we walked through the shop.

The glass door stood half open. As Aunt Catherine pushed it gently, a sharp-faced little man, with rough sandy hair, jumped up out of the easy-chair and confronted us. From his appearance I knew at once that this was Mr. Barton. He looked ill and flurried, and stared at us in the strangest way.

'I hope we do not intrude, Mr. Barton, but this young lady and I have come to see Aline,' began Aunt Catherine, but he interrupted her almost brusquely :

'Do you mean you have not got my telegram?'

'Telegram? No. Why, what is the matter, Mr. Barton? You look dreadful!'

'Not more dreadful than I feel, ma'am. To think I have lived to see this day!' and here he choked, and seemed hardly able to speak. 'She has done for herself, my poor Allie—she will never vex us more! This morning, when Becky went to call her, she was lying in her bed quite stiff and cold ; and—and had been dead for hours!'

'Dead!' For the moment I thought Aunt Catherine was going to faint, the shock was so great. I pushed her a chair, but I felt as though I could hardly support myself. But I noticed, all the same, that Mr. Barton wiped his eyes with a yellow silk handkerchief, covered with red spots, and felt a sickly sort of surprise at his taste, and then the room seemed to turn round, and after that, he began speaking again :

'We have had the doctors here—two of them ; and they are pretty well agreed as to the cause of death—it is an overdose of

chloral. She was never careful about quantities, poor girl! and they say, from the look of the bottle, she has taken enough to kill her.'

'Tell me one thing—forgive me if I hurt you, Mr. Barton—but do you think Aline—has—has done this on purpose?'

Aunt Catherine could hardly get the words out, her agitation was so great. The poor little man recoiled as though he had been struck.

'Heaven's sake, ma'am, no! What could have put such an idea into your head? Allie, with all her faults, wasn't the girl to do a thing like that. Wait a bit till I can pull myself together, and then I will tell you all I know. But you may take my word for it—and I know Allie through and through—that she is as innocent of this as a child unborn.'

'Thank God!' and the colour came back to Aunt Catherine's lips; but I could only sob in a helpless, girlish way at the thought that Aline would never speak to me again; and neither of us could say a word of comfort to the poor heartbroken brother.

'I was struck all of a heap when I saw Allie come into the shop on Saturday night,' he began presently, 'looking like a duchess in her velvet and furs. We mostly close late on Saturday nights, and it was half-past eleven then; and as the customers were staring at her, I just whispered her to go into the parlour, and I would follow her. And the first words she said to me were, "I have left Basil!" And then, taking my two hands and squeezing them hard, she went on: "You must take care of me, George! for the life there is driving me mad, and I could not answer for myself any longer."

'Well, you may be sure I reasoned with her, and nearly talked myself hoarse about it being her duty to stop with her husband and put up with things; but I could not make any impression on her, and she looked so white and ill that I was forced to send her to bed at last. But she told me next morning she had not slept a wink. But, for all that, she went to chapel along with me, and sat in her old place, and, vexed as I was with her contrarieness, I couldn't help being proud to see how folks stared at her, and how well set up and handsome she looked.'

And here he broke down, and it was some time before he could recover himself.

'There is not a woman who can hold a candle to her; and she looked like a queen that day. And when we came home, and I saw her opposite to me again, I was as pleased to get her back as I could be. We sat over the fire and had a long talk all the afternoon, and she told me about things. Fleming—I mean

Lyndhurst—had been good to her, I could see that, and she was as fond of him as ever; but I could not get her to promise that she would go back to him; she kept saying over and over again, till it angered me to hear her, that he and Reggie were better without her—she seemed to have got a craze on that point.

‘I thought she got a little low towards evening, so I gave up my chapel that night and stopped with her; and I am glad I did. Ay, Allie, I am glad of that now! And we talked about father and the old days; but if I mentioned her husband, she just hung her head and sat twisting the diamond rings on her fingers, as though she hardly knew how to bear herself. The next day I saw little of her, being busy in the shop; but at dinner-time I thought she looked pale. She was in one of her silent moods at tea-time, and got up before we had half finished, and went up to her room. Later on, Becky saw her coming upstairs with her bonnet on, and asked where she had been; but Allie never answered her, except to say her head ached, and she was going to bed. “I had my misgivings,” Becky said to me this morning, “that she had been after no good, and I looked after her pretty sharply, until she was safe in bed. But she was too deep for me.” She must have got an old prescription made up—for she once had to have sleeping-draughts; but she did not go to any chemist who knew her. It was carelessness that made her take the overdose, most likely, as Dr. Baddeley says she may have been impatient to sleep, and taken all there was to have; and no one found out anything about it till Becky went in and pulled up the blind this morning,’ finished Mr. Barton, in such an accent of misery that my tears flowed faster than ever.

‘May we see her?’ asked Aunt Catherine, in a low voice. ‘Olga, you would like to see her;’ and a dreary sort of gleam came into Mr. Barton’s eyes.

‘You shall see Allie, and welcome; and you will say for yourself that she looks like a picture. And as for this young lady, who has been so good to my poor girl, it is little I could refuse her. Shall I lead the way, ma’am? There is no need to call Becky, for though she is ready, she is rough, and quiet ways have always suited Allie best;’ and talking under his breath in this innocent, garrulous fashion, he preceded us up the steep, narrow stairs.

It was a small room, but very neatly furnished, and the first object that attracted my attention was a beautifully-framed photograph of Mr. Basil and Reggie. The bed stood in the corner, covered with a white sheet. Aunt Catherine folded it back gently, and beckoned me to stand beside her.

'Like a picture!' Never had I seen anything so beautiful—no sleeping babe ever seemed more calm and peaceful than Aline looked as she lay there, with her white hands crossed upon her breast.

There was something touching in the simple arrangements. Rough but kindly hands had been at work. They had unfastened the coils of hair, and two long plaits framed the beautiful face. The sullenness that had so often clouded it in life would mar it no longer. There was no need to ask if Aline slept sweetly—there was even the semblance of a smile on the lips.

'Do not cry so bitterly, Olga,' whispered Aunt Catherine, in a broken voice. 'Who can doubt that with the All-merciful there is mercy? If she has failed, she has also repented.'

'You are right there,' returned Mr. Barton, who had overheard this. 'Allie, with all her faults, was good in her own way. I used to tell Fleming so. Never a night that she did not say her prayers; I would hear her sometimes at them, speaking quite loudly. "Tied and bound with the chain of our sins"—I heard her say these words once. And it was beautiful to hear her singing the hymns in chapel. You had a deal to bear, Allie; but I always said others were to blame, not you. And I believe it from my heart.'

I could scarcely listen to the end of the sentence. Some one was coming up the stairs with weary, flagging footsteps—but I recognised them. The telegram had reached him—he had followed us very closely. I shrank behind the bed-curtains. How I wished I could escape before he entered the room!

'Basil—oh, my poor boy!' in a pitiful voice from Aunt Catherine.

But he did not seem to hear it, or notice any one, as he walked straight to the bed. His face was pale, and his eyes had the dazed look of a sleep-walker, and held some horror in them. No, he did not see us; he saw nothing but the marble whiteness of the still figure that lay before him.

Poor Mr. Barton could not long keep silence.

'So you've come, Fleming—you have come to see the last of Allie! She will never vex you more, poor girl!'

Mr. Basil put his hand almost roughly on his shoulder.

'Don't speak to me like that, George; I cannot bear it! If I could have guessed that she would do such a thing, I would have followed her at once.'

Then I knew that the same terrible thought that had been in Aunt Catherine's mind was in his also.

'Basil, it was not that; it was an accident. Oh, my dear, do not think that for a moment!'

But I heard no more. I crept softly out of the room, and went downstairs. Becky was laying the table in the little parlour. She was a grim, red-haired woman. As she carried away her tray, I saw her eyes were red with crying; but she did not speak to me. It seemed to me that a long time passed; it must have been nearly an hour. I paced up and down the little room, or looked through the stand of plants down into the yard below. What a homely, shabby little place it was! and yet there was an air of comfort pervading it. The fire burnt cheerily; a large black cat was stretched on the rug; Mr. Barton's pipe and newspaper lay on the shelf beside his elbow-chair; a walnut-wood workbox, evidently Aline's, was on the small chiffonnier. Presently Aunt Catherine came down to me alone.

'He is better now, Olga,' she said, with gentle composure. 'He and Mr. Barton are still talking; but they are not in that room. My poor child, you must be faint with want of food; it is nearly three o'clock. We must take something quickly, and then Basil wishes us to go home. He will follow later in the evening; there is so much to arrange, poor fellow!'

'You will not stop with him? I could find my way, indeed I could, Aunt Catherine.'

'No; he does not want me. He will be better alone; he is quite calm now he knows that his worst fear is not verified. I think if it had been'—with deep emotion—'Basil would never have held up his head again; but we are all spared that.'

It was a long, dreary journey home. Aunt Catherine scarcely spoke; a sense of unreality took possession of me as I looked out into the darkness as the glimmering hedgerows seemed to fly past. Yesterday, at this hour, Aline was alive in the fulness of health and beauty; to-day—oh, the pity of it! the strange, inscrutable mystery that shrouded her!

I thought of that last message, so touching in its simplicity: 'Give my love to Olga, and tell her not to fret; I was never worth the trouble she took with me!' and I felt that, in spite of the three short months I had known her, I had grown to love her dearly. Yes, in spite of her strange, undeveloped nature, her curious moods, the pain she had often given me, she had somehow wound herself round my heart.

The carriage was at the station, and I was put down at the gate of Fircroft. As I bade Aunt Catherine a sorrowful good-night, she told me, in a low voice, for Reynolds was standing by us, that she would let me know how things went on with them.

Jem was at the door to meet me. As I raised my face for him to kiss me, he put his hand under my chin and looked at me.

'Poor little woman!' he said very kindly, 'you are just worn out with all this. Nurse has lighted a fire in your room, and you can have your tea there in peace; and I will look after the kids, and keep them quiet.'

Was it not dear and thoughtful of Jem? but in real trouble there was no one who could sympathise so nicely as Jem.

The quiet rest in my own room refreshed me, and later in the evening I was able to sit with Kitty; both she and Hubert were very much shocked at the news, which had reached them quite early. In fact, Hubert had been up at the Hall when the telegram arrived, and he had accompanied poor Mr. Basil to the station.

'He would not have remembered to take his ticket if I had not taken it for him,' Hubert told me. 'I never saw a man so upset; he seemed quite dazed. The telegram was too vaguely worded; it gave us margin to imagine all sorts of horrors. I am more thankful than I can say to hear your account, Olga;' and then they very kindly dismissed me to bed.

CHAPTER XL

'TROUBLES SELDOM COME SINGLY'

'Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes; to the very end!
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to eve, my friend!'

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

'Be strong to bear, O heart!
Nothing is vain;
Strive not, for life is care,
And God sends pain;
Heaven is above, and there
Rest will remain.'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

HUBERT went to the Hall the next morning; on his return he brought me a note from Aunt Catherine:

'Basil is much calmer to-day,' she wrote. 'He is with Virginia now; he says it does him good to be with her. Do you remember those sweet old words, Olga, "As one whom his mother comforteth"? Perhaps some good may come out of all this trouble, and those two may be drawn more closely together.

'Basil has settled everything. Aline is to be brought here. He says Mr. Barton at first seemed rather upset at the notion, but now he knows he is to come too, he makes no further objection. Basil has written to beg Mr. Fleming to read the service. Everything will be as quiet as possible, and she is to be buried near the Seftons. Basil thinks her brother will be pleased at that. I am glad to see how thoughtful he is for Mr. Barton's comfort; he will be with us for some days, for Basil insists that he should remain with us over Christmas. What a Christmas it will be, Olga!'

Aunt Catherine's note was the one spot of comfort in the day.

Alas! before evening came, the trouble at the Hall was blotted out of my mind by a new and crushing blow. 'Troubles seldom come singly,' is not that what the proverb says? but seldom, indeed, have 'the clouds returned after the rain' quite so quickly!

The London physician came down in the afternoon. When he and Dr. Langham had visited the patient, there was a short consultation, and then Hubert was summoned. Later on Dr. Langham spoke to Jem.

It was Jem who told me the result of their verdict. There was no hope for Kitty, they had told Hubert so plainly. The chill, in her enfeebled condition, had taken too strong a hold on her; rapid decline had set in. Dr. Langham had been aware of this; but Hubert had refused to understand his hints, and he had made up his mind that a stranger's opinion would be more readily believed.

I looked at Jem in speechless consternation. I was too much stunned to say a word. Our poor, pretty Kitty! No, it was impossible to credit it.

'Olga, you and I must be strong for Hubert's sake. Poor old man! he will need all the help we can give him. We must not think of ourselves.'

'No, Jem;' then, almost in a whisper, 'Where is he—Hubert, I mean?'

'He is with Kitty. Nurse has come down and left them together. She says Kitty is wonderfully calm. She asked Dr. Rupert herself how long she was likely to live, as though she were quite aware of her condition; and now she is only thinking of Hubert.'

'Oh, if I had only been kinder to her! If I had not made so much of all her little faults!' Alas! why—why is this our first speech when those we love are threatened with death? And again those tenderly reproachful words of Amiel seemed to sweep over my soul: 'Life is short, and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are travelling the same dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love! Make haste to be kind!' I hid my face in my hands, and wept bitterly.

Jem was very patient with me, though he needed comfort himself. He stroked my hair, and said, 'Poor little thing!' once or twice.

'You were upset yesterday with all that terrible business,' he said presently. 'And you are not fit for another blow; and this comes so near home, too. I don't feel as though I could talk about it much,' in rather a choky voice; 'I must keep myself for

Hubert. Nurse has gone out to see her sister, who is ill, and the poor children are waiting for their tea. I vote we go and give it them, Olga; that will be better than crying your eyes out;’ and though Jem’s consolation was a little too bracing for the tender state of my spirits, a sense of duty made me bathe my eyes and go into the schoolroom.

The children were all huddled round the fire. Hugh had little Flo on his knee, and Mab was telling them a story. Wilfred clapped his hands gleefully when he saw us.

‘There is plum-cake for tea, and we are all so drefferly hungry,’ he said. ‘Nurse said we must wait for you; and we thought you were never coming—didn’t we, Mab? Are you going to have tea with us too, Uncle Jem?’

‘Why, you don’t want to eat up the plum-cake all by yourself, do you, Willie? Hugh, old fellow, hand me the matches; we must throw a light on the subject. Now then, the kettle is boiling, Olga, so set to work, or these young folk will eat me.’

Only Jessie and Wilfred laughed at this feeble little joke. Mab was looking at me anxiously, and Hugh whispered:

‘What does the new doctor say about mother, auntie?’

Luckily, Jem heard the whisper, and came to my help.

‘Don’t tease Aunt Olga with questions, children; she has got a headache. You have a headache, have you not?’ looking at me rather doubtfully. How convenient these ailments are sometimes!

I wondered how Jem could talk in that easy fashion, cutting great slices of bread and cake all the time, and helping Flo with her bib; but I noticed he could not eat himself, and not even the thinnest, crispest slice of toast could tempt him.

‘Give me some more tea; that is all I want,’ he observed, as I looked at him.

It was quite late in the evening before I saw Kitty. Jem and I had made a pretence of dining together. Hubert could not be induced to leave his study, so Jem made me cut a sandwich, and took it in to him.

‘I do believe dogs know everything that is going on,’ he said, as he sat down again. ‘Would you believe it, Rollo is in there with Hubert. I never remember him in the study before. He is lying on the rug quite close to his chair, and I could not coax him away; he just looked at me, and then wagged his tail. Olga, Rollo knows poor old Hubert is in trouble.’

‘Do you think I may go to him?’ rather doubtfully.

‘No, he is much better alone; you could not do him any good. If I were in his case, I would not have a creature near me, except Rollo. Yes, I think I would have Rollo.’

I did not ask *Jem's* leave to go up to *Kitty*; she would be expecting me, I knew. Nurse was just leaving the room. *Kitty* was lying quietly on her pillows; she held out her arms to me without a word, and for a little while we held each other fast.

'I have known it all along, *Olga*,' she whispered at last. 'Ever since I took that chill I felt how it must end. I did not tell my thoughts even to *Hubert*; he would know soon enough—that was what I said to myself—and so I got through my bad times alone.'

Dear *Kitty*—dear, brave little *Kitty*!—and we had no idea of this!

'It was very sad at first. I used to lie awake in the night and think of *Hubert* and the children, and what they would do without me. I used to feel so wicked sometimes, as though I could not die, and go away from them all. And then I longed to wake *Hubert*, and ask him to talk to me; but I am glad now I let him sleep; he will have time enough to fret!'

'But he might have helped you. I cannot bear to think of your going through these dreary times alone.'

'Dear, we must die alone! *Hubert* cannot help me then; but, after all, I was not left long in the darkness. I feel better about things now, and so I was able to comfort *Hubert* a little, though it nearly broke my heart to see him so unhappy.'

'It has come upon him so suddenly.'

'Yes, he has been blinding himself. He tells me now that he fought down his fears, and would not face them. That has been a great mistake. *Olga*, they do not think I shall suffer much; that is a blessing, is it not? for I am so worn and weak. I feel as though I could not bear much more.'

'Please do not talk so!' I returned piteously.

'It is such a relief to talk,' she answered, with a sigh; 'but I do not want to distress you. There is so much I want to say to you about the children, but I am too tired now. Here is nurse coming back, so perhaps you had better say good-night.'

I crept away to my room. Nurse had again lighted my fire, and as I sat shivering over it, too wretched and oppressed for any more tears, a dull, heavy weight seemed settling on my heart. Who has not known these hours, these languors, these terrors, when the hand of our God lies heavy upon us, and when in all the world there seems no light for us? The shadow of death hovered over *Fircroft*. The tender-hearted wife and mother was fading out of life; and *Hubert*—poor *Hubert*! would have no one to help him but an inexperienced girl; no wonder my heart fainted within me, as I thought of the future.

It was long after midnight before Hubert came up to bed. Jem was with him. I heard them exchange a whispered word as they passed my door. It was no use stupefying myself any longer with these miserable thoughts. I went to bed too, and dreamt that I was playing with Reggie in the garden of La Maissonnette.

I resolved to keep this fresh trouble from Aunt Catherine until the funeral was over. I said very little in my note. Perhaps she had forgotten that we had made that appointment with Dr. Rupert; she certainly asked no questions. I told her Kitty seemed weaker, and that was all. I did not go up to the Hall. Mr. Fleming and Mr. Barton were there, and I should only have felt myself in the way. I devoted myself to Kitty and the children, and tried to do little things for Hubert. It is strange how a great trouble seems to transform people. The change in Hubert was singular. All his fussiness and pomposity had vanished; he was very gentle with us all, and seemed very grateful for any little attention; but how gray and old he looked—our poor Hubert! He was never willingly away from Kitty; he would allow no one else to lift her from the bed to the couch. It was touching to see how he watched and waited on her; and Kitty loved to have him with her. We used to leave them together as much as possible. I often found them talking earnestly; sometimes he would be reading to her.

Hubert could not bring himself to go to the funeral. Jem went in his place, but he told me very little about it, except that Mr. Fleming had read the service beautifully, and that the churchyard was full of people. Reggie spent the day with us, and showed me his black suit with an air of dignity.

‘Mother is dead, my Dear,’ he said rather pompously; ‘but father did not cry. The angel what tooked her had big white wings, father said so;’ and I heard him repeating this to Girlie in the nursery.

I was with the children most of the day, and tried not to think of all that was passing at the Hall: by and by I would visit Aline’s grave, and lay some flowers on it.

The following evening was Christmas Eve. I had just given the children their tea, and Hubert, as usual, was sitting with Kitty, when Jane told me Miss Sefton was in the drawing-room, and I went down to her at once. The lamp had not been lighted, but the ruddy glow of the firelight gave us light enough.

‘This is kind!’ I exclaimed, as I threw my arms round her; ‘dear Aunt Catherine! I never thought of your coming to me so soon.’

‘I wanted to see you for several reasons. You are looking

pale, my child. You must not take our troubles too much to heart. Oh, Olga, Mr. Fleming has been such a comfort to us! he has done Basil so much good.'

'Is he still with you?'

'No; he was obliged to leave us last night. He could not possibly be spared an hour longer. But he was with us for two days.'

'And poor Mr. Barton?'

'Oh, he is at the Hall still. He has promised to remain until Tuesday, and then he and Basil go up to town together. Basil goes on to Leeds; he has consented to spend two or three weeks with Mr. Fleming. We all think the change will do him good.'

'Will he take Reggie?'

'No, he dare not—Leeds is so cold. He will be better with us. Basil feels himself that he must get away for a little; all this trouble has unhinged him terribly. He looks quite ill, poor fellow!'

'I do not wonder at it,' in a low voice; 'but I am glad he is going to Mr. Fleming.'

'So am I; no one understands him so well. And, Olga, I must tell you, Basil has been so good to Mr. Barton; he has consulted him about everything, and has treated him with so much kindness and consideration. Mr. Barton told me so himself.'

'It must have been very trying for him to come to the Hall under such circumstances.'

'Yes; but he would not have stayed away for worlds. He wanted to see his Allie's home, as he said. He used to go into the Lady's Room and look at her things; he even fingered the dresses she wore; and he took such pleasure in seeing the flowers people sent. He noticed your wreath at once. Poor Mr. Barton! I think we all like him; he is so simple, so faithful. I suppose Jem told you how terribly upset he was at the funeral?'

'No; Jem never likes talking of such things.'

'He sobbed dreadfully. It went to one's heart to hear him; but when we got to the grave Basil put his hand on his shoulder and made him stand by him. "You have the best right, George," I heard him say, for I was behind them both. Mr. Barton says he will never forget that as long as he lives. I do believe he is fond of Basil.' I was thankful to hear these little details. It was dear and good of Aunt Catherine to tell me all this.

'And, Olga, there is another thing. Basil was speaking to me this morning. He wants you to choose something of Aline's to wear in memory of her; he thinks you would like it. It must

be something she has used—a ring, or some ornament; but he wishes you to choose.’

‘He is very kind,’ the tears coming to my eyes, ‘but I shall not need any remembrance of Aline; you do not know how I miss her, Aunt Catherine. In her own way she was so good to me.’

‘She was very fond of you. Basil said he saw that from the first. Would you rather that I chose for you, Olga? There’s a pretty ring with pink coral and diamonds, that Basil bought her that day he first went up to town. She always wore it, and it was on her finger to the last.’

‘Oh, not that one,’ flushing painfully; ‘Mr. Basil would not like it. Something far less handsome.’

‘Well, well; Basil shall decide. But it is a nice thought—he is so grateful to you for all you have done. Why, what is the matter, Olga?’ for I found it impossible to restrain my tears.

‘Do not let us talk about rings any longer,’ I said, for I wanted to change the subject dreadfully; ‘we are all so unhappy, and I have wanted you so;’ and then I poured out my troubles.

Aunt Catherine did not seem in the least surprised, but she was very much grieved for us all, and said everything she could to comfort me. She would not let me dwell on the future. ‘At such times one can only live day by day,’ she observed very sensibly; ‘we must not overstrain the mind by looking forward too much. Strength for the day—the hour—that is all we need!’

She stayed with me until Jem came to summon me to dinner. We were both surprised at the lateness of the hour.

‘You have done me so much good,’ I whispered, as I kissed her; and she smiled, well pleased at that.

It was the saddest Christmas Day I had ever passed; and though Jem and I did our best for the poor children, and had little gifts ready for each of them, they all complained how dull it was with mother upstairs. I could only attend the morning service. Mr. Basil was in his usual place, and Mr. Barton was beside him, but after the first glance I dared not look in that direction again.

My thoughts were heavy enough, and it was difficult to join in the glorious chants and hymns, all breathing the joy-giving message of peace and universal gladness.

I glanced at Hubert; his grave, abstracted face told me where his thoughts were straying; but he went through the service manfully, and preached better than I had ever heard him.

Later in the day, as I was sitting in Kitty’s room, a small

packet was brought me, and on opening it I saw poor Aline's pink coral and diamond ring. A little brooch, prettily set with pearls, in the shape of a horse-shoe, accompanied it, with a pencilled note from Aunt Catherine :

'I could not bear to think that my usual Christmas gift should be wanting, so I am sending you this brooch. You have often seen me pin my lace with it—I think it will just suit you. I told Basil last night that you seemed reluctant to choose anything, and he said at once I had better send the pink coral ring ; but I will give you his words : "Ask her to wear it always, in remembrance of my poor Aline. I will say nothing of my gratitude—it will only embarrass her ; and she loves to do good to every one. Let it be only in memory of Aline."' '

I thought Kitty looked at me rather curiously as she examined the ring.

'It is very beautiful,' she said—'almost too handsome for a girl ; but you have a pretty hand, Olga. Were you so fond of that poor thing, after all ?'

'Yes,' was my sole answer, as I shut up the case.

I found my note of thanks very difficult. 'Tell Mr. Basil that I shall value the gift for Aline's sake,' was all I managed to write ; my thanks were far more profuse for the little pearl brooch.

I did not go up to the Hall until Wednesday. On my way I visited Aline's grave ; it was in my favourite corner, near a weeping willow ; the mound was covered with wreaths and crosses.

Reggie was delighted to see me ; he had been fretting about his father's absence all the morning, but Aunt Catherine had promised that Wilfred should come and play with him every day, so he had cheered up. I had tea with her and Mrs. Lyndhurst, and we sat over the fire talking. They both spoke cheerfully of Mr. Basil ; he had seemed in better spirits when he left, and more like himself.

'He feels Aline's death dreadfully,' added Mrs. Lyndhurst. 'I think if he had loved her more, he would have suffered less. He is blaming himself for everything he did or left undone. Mr. Barton's grief is much easier to bear.'

'Poor Mr. Barton ! it will be a dreary going home for him.'

'Strange to say, he talks as though she were with him still ; it is Allie's room, and Allie's chair, just as though she were alive. He says her things shall be about, as they always were—that he shall put nothing away. Basil has promised to go and see him sometimes, and he is to come here whenever he likes. Catherine, did you notice how he shook his head when Basil said that ?'

‘No ; and I went out of the room almost immediately.’

‘Well, he turned to me and said, “It is very kind of your son, ma’am, to make me free, as it were, of Allie’s home, and I am mightily obliged to him for the thought ; but I am happier in my own little place. Allie seems to belong to me more there—if you can follow my meaning. I remember the day when she was so small that she could only peep over the counter. ‘Lift me up, George,’ she would say, ‘I want to play at shop too ;’ and she would sit there weighing out coffee and sugar in her doll’s scales as pretty as possible, and all the customers taking notice of her. Wasn’t father proud of her then !”’

‘And he will not come to the Hall ?’

‘No ; I am sure he will not. He will be far happier talking to Becky about his Allie. After all, Olga, this sort of grief is almost akin to joy. After a time the remembrance will be as dear to him as Aline herself. My pity is more for my own poor boy.’

‘Mr. Fleming will do him good,’ interposed Aunt Catherine hastily ; and it was evident from her manner that she wished no more to be said on this subject, and then they both talked to me about Kitty, and Mrs. Lyndhurst promised to come and see her.

‘It will be my first visit for five-and-twenty years,’ she said, with a faint smile. ‘But Basil says he does not like his mother to be such a recluse, so I shall begin with Mrs. Leigh ;’ and actually she came the next day, much to Kitty’s astonishment. But, as Aunt Catherine told me afterwards, Mrs. Lyndhurst was an altered woman—all her unhealthy whims and fancies, her hypochondriac ideas, were vanishing under her son’s influence.

‘If Basil expresses a wish, it is enough ; Virginia simply lives to please him. I am sure he loves her better every day,’ she finished, with a sigh of satisfaction.

Mr. Basil remained away three weeks, and then he only came home, as he said, because he could not stay away from Reggie any longer.

I saw him a few days after his return ; he came to Fircroft to ask after Kitty. Jem was with me in the drawing-room. I thought he looked older, and was very grave and constrained in his manner, and he only remained about twenty minutes.

He said that it had been a great pleasure to him to stay with his old friend ; the Vicarage was large and comfortable, and Mr. Fleming had furnished it with much taste. As his second curate was only in deacon’s orders, the vicar had a great deal to do, and he had felt it incumbent on him to act in some measure as a lay helper. ‘But we had some good long talks in the study of an evening,’ he continued ; ‘and if it had not been for the little chap

I should have stayed much longer, for he was so pleased to have me—he said it was like the old times.'

Jem asked a few questions about Leeds, and then he was called away to speak to some one on business, as Hubert was out. Directly he left the room, Mr. Basil got up from his chair.

'Must you go so soon?' I asked in some surprise, for I wanted to hear more about the Leeds visit.

'I believe I must,' he returned rather absently; and then he told me that they were all going to Hastings for two or three weeks. 'You know my mother has never slept out of the Hall for five-and-twenty years, and I am very anxious there should be a departure from all her old habits. Dr. Langham is charmed with the idea. Aunt Catherine wanted to remain behind, but I would not hear of that for a moment, so we are all going; and I intend Mr. Fleming to give us a week by and by. He declares he has not been to the sea for eight years.'

Was Mr. Basil only thinking of his mother, or had his trouble made him restless? He certainly did not look well, and he was more nervous than I had ever seen him. Just before he left, I saw him glance at my right hand. I suppose the diamonds, small as they were, flashed in the firelight.

'Do you always wear it?' he asked in a very low tone.

'Yes, always. I have grown so fond of it; it reminds me of Aline.'

'I am glad of that. Do you know, she once spoke of you to me as a little white angel. She was very fond of you—very. Good-bye, Miss Leigh, if I do not see you again before we go. I am grieved to leave you in such trouble; if I thought you would like Aunt Catherine to remain, she should stay, after all.'

'Oh no—no!' quite shocked at the idea. 'She would be so lonely without you all, and I could not be with her; when I am not with Kitty, the children want me; there is so much to do; I could never see Aunt Catherine even if she were at the Hall.'

'And I am keeping you now; how thoughtless of me! Do not let them overwork you. I am glad you have your brother to look after you.'

'Jem goes to Oxford on Thursday,' I said sorrowfully, for the dread of this was already weighing heavily on my burdened spirits.

'I am sorry for that'—very gravely; 'there is no one to look after you, then, and you are tired, very tired, now.'

'No!' But I could not trust myself to say another word; the kind look and tone were too much for me. He said 'Good-bye' rather hastily after that, and I fancied I heard 'God bless you!'

I felt very low the remainder of the evening; every one seemed going away; and how I should miss Aunt Catherine! though it was quite true what I had said, that I should have seen nothing of her, only when one is in trouble it is a comfort to feel people are near.

Aunt Catherine came to me the next day in much distress.

'What am I to do, Olga?' she said; 'Basil has changed his mind, and wants me to remain behind; and now Virginia says she cannot go without me. He is getting worried and wishes he had never proposed the plan. I am sure you are in his mind, and he thinks you need me.'

I would not let Aunt Catherine see how much this thoughtfulness touched me; but I scouted the idea of her remaining with much energy:

'I should be torn in halves,' I said feelingly; 'I should be always longing to get to you, and tell you my troubles, and it would be impossible.'

'But I might come to you, as I do now,' she replied, looking at me very kindly.

'No, that would not do at all. Hubert told me yesterday that I must deny myself to visitors now Kitty is worse. I shall not like your being so far from me; but, all the same, it will be the best for both of us.'

'Perhaps so'—reluctantly—'and I do not know how to refuse Virginia. Poor dear! she is quite excited about this trip. You must send me a few lines every day; and if you want me, Olga, I can come up at a minute's notice.'

So we settled it; on Thursday Jem went back to Oxford, and on the next day the Hall was empty.

CHAPTER XLI

'BE GOOD TO HUBERT'

'I bent to kiss her cheek,
And blessed her softly in the name of God,
And bade her go in peace. Yea, with a smile,
Which God had given me, I loosed my hold,
And suffered her to rise and go to Him.

'And now, at evening-time, when all the stars
Keep watch along the battlements of heaven,
She bendeth from the palace-walls to watch
For my home-going step.'

Ezekiel and other Poems.

JEM's last words to me were: 'Do your best for them all, and do not fret if your best is not perfect; put all your feelings in the background.' But I knew by the way he looked how sorry he was to leave me.

Only Harry had come back; both Mr. Cunningham and Mr. Campbell had left last term, and no new pupils had replaced them. No one minded Harry; he was so good-natured and thoughtful that he was never in the way. He was always on the watch to do kind things for every one, and his cheery presence was quite a relief at meal-times. Poor little Hugh had gone back to school. Kitty broke down sadly when she said good-bye to him; indeed, her emotion so terrified Hubert that he hurried the child away. But it was a long time before he could soothe her. It seemed to us all that she grew rapidly worse after this. In a few days her weakness was so great that she could not even be lifted to the couch, and the least attempt to talk brought on the terrible fits of coughing.

I should have liked to have been more in the sick-room, but I dared not interfere with nurse; she was so experienced and capable that Dr. Langham could not say enough in her praise. She had

lived with them ever since Hugh's birth, and was devoted to them all. Nurse and Hubert left me little to do, so I gave the children their lessons, wrote letters for Hubert, and tried to regulate the household, and only crept into Kitty's room at odd moments, happy if nurse would let me help her.

I had had several talks with Kitty before she grew worse; she used to tell nurse to leave her with Miss Olga for half an hour, and then she would talk to me about Hubert and the children. I never knew any one so thoughtful. Once she made me bring her all her ornaments, and the few simple treasures she had accumulated in her short life, and told me which were for Mab and Jessie. She forgot no one. There were presents for the servants, for Jem, and me; even for Aunt Catherine, because, she said, she had been so kind to me. And there were little sums of money for her poor.

'Hubert said I might do it,' she explained. 'My poor little fortune has dwindled sadly. But Hubert wishes it to be divided among the children; he will have nothing for himself; he says he wants nothing but to lie down beside his Kitty in the churchyard;' and here a tear or two stole down her face.

Another time we had been talking about the twins, and she said:

'Mab is very clever, and she will be nine next July. I should not have been able to teach her long. Mrs. Vereker was speaking to me in the autumn about that nice-looking woman who has come to live at Fir Cottage with her invalid sister. I think her name is Miss Boyle. She has been a governess, Mrs. Vereker says, and has lived in very good families; but she has been obliged to come home on account of her sister's bad health. She will be very glad to hear of a morning's engagement.'

'Were you thinking of her for Mab and Jessie?'

'Yes; I thought of speaking to Hubert about it. One gets so interrupted, and they ought to have regular lessons now. Mab is getting on so nicely with her music and French. Perhaps by and by—in a few months, I mean—you will tell Hubert what I say. I cannot trouble him about these little details; he seems as though he cannot take things in just now.' True wifely heart, she was sparing him to the last.

I told her very quietly that I would speak to him—that she need have no fear that anything she told me would be forgotten; and she looked so grateful and relieved.

'It is so nice to think that they will have you for a little,' she sighed. 'It makes me more comfortable to know that.'

'For a little; what do you mean, Kitty?'

She smiled faintly at my denseness.

'Of course you will marry, Olga, and live your own life, as I have lived mine. Do you think I am blind to that fact?' And then, putting up her hand to silence me as I was about to contradict this, she went on feebly: 'Dear, I would not have it otherwise. Do you think I could be so selfish as to want you to sacrifice yourself to my children? Hubert will take care of them—only stay with them a year or two, until they miss me less; will you promise me this?'

'I will promise you far more,' I began eagerly, for my heart was full to the brim just then; but she put her wasted hand on my lips.

'I will have no other promise. I know how generous you are. Dying people ought not to take undue advantage. How can either of us know what circumstances may arise? No, Olga, you must not bind yourself; let it be as I said;' and then she closed her eyes wearily and I dared say no more.

I sat by her for a long time, hardly daring to breathe lest I should disturb her, and with my heart throbbing with mingled pity and pain. Why should I not sacrifice myself? who would ever want me but Harry? and I was certainly not going to leave Hubert and the children for him. Would it not be a good useful life to care for those motherless little ones? would not any girl do it in my place? and yet—such is human nature—I was glad, secretly glad that Kitty would not let me make that promise. Perhaps in her far-sighted, womanly wisdom she understood me better than I did myself.

Kitty often very innocently gave me pain; only the next day she made me feel uncomfortable.

We were on the same subject, Hubert and the children; and all at once she stopped and looked at me very wistfully.

'Will you try to put up with Hubert's little ways—you and Jem?' she said gently. 'I know you have often thought him fussy about trifles, and when he is unhappy he is apt to get irritable; all men are like that. I should like to feel that you and Jem would not mind.'

'Oh,' I burst out, for the moment forgetful of her weakness, and how little she could bear, 'I deserve that you should say this to me! I know how horrid I have been to Hubert; even Jem has found fault with me, and now——' but here a contrite sob stopped my utterance.

Kitty looked frightened. She raised herself, panting a little, to kiss me, and tell me she did not mean that.

'Don't, dear!' she said tenderly. 'I never like to see you fret. You are made for brightness, Olga. Do you think I

remember all your little faults, when I have so many of my own? Do you know, I wanted to ask you and Jem to forgive me; but I never had courage to do it. I know how I have tried you both; and I meant, if I got well, that everything should be so different. But I shall never have the chance of doing better'—looking at me so sadly that I could only hide my face in the pillow, and tell her, in a broken voice, how dearly Jem and I loved her, and how we should miss her; and I think this was what she wanted to hear.

'I should like to see Jem again. I did not bid him good-bye properly,' she said by and by. 'You must send for him—when—when I get worse. Hubert will want him;' and she said this more than once.

All this was before her weakness became so great. By and by sadder days came, when she could only whisper a few words to Hubert, when she lay on her pillows racked by that terrible cough—exhausted, but patient—her large dark eyes often fixed for minutes together on her husband's face. The strain was telling upon Hubert, strong man as he was. He was becoming unfit for his work. I wrote and told Jem so; and in a few days there was a letter to Hubert from one of Jem's friends, a young clergyman only just in priest's orders. He was leaving his curacy, and offered his services temporarily. We urged Hubert to close with this proposition. He could lodge in the village; and he would be a nice companion to Harry Vivian. His name was Bernard Montague. He and Jem were great friends. I forget where Jem had first met him. He was a quiet-looking man with a pleasant manner, and such a musical voice that his friends were looking for a minor canonry for him. He worked splendidly in the parish, and even offered to read Latin and Greek with Harry, whose studies were being carried on somewhat fitfully. Harry told me he was engaged to a very nice girl living in Kensington—a Miss Campbell.

I gave a little start at this information, and asked rather anxiously if her name were Violet; but Harry did not know. The impudent boy must actually have questioned Mr. Montague on the subject; for he told me the next day that Violet was the name of the eldest sister, and that she was very nice, too. Mr. Montague's *fiancée* was named Barbara; and she was very pretty, only rather like a gipsy, for he had seen her picture; and so on. For Harry would try to amuse me with any sort of chit-chat.

Hubert felt Mr. Montague's help was a great relief. His bad nights were wearing him out; and yet he would not allow any one else to share the night-nursing with nurse. He had a little bed

in his dressing-room ; but if he heard Kitty's voice, he would wake immediately ; and he was the greater part of the day with her, too. He was wonderfully handy for a man, and his strong arms were always available.

No one could put her in so comfortable a position, Kitty said ; and it was nice to feel that he was always near her night and day, and ready to read and pray with her.

One day at the beginning of February, Kitty had had an unusually bad day. Dr. Langham had come three times ; and after his last visit Hubert came into the schoolroom, where I was sitting with the children, and told me he had telegraphed for Jem.

'Dr. Langham says she cannot last long now,' he said in a low voice, that the children might not hear. 'I doubt whether he will be in time ;' and he walked slowly out of the room.

I ran after him.

'Oh, Hubert !' I implored, 'do speak to nurse. I must be with you to-night—I must indeed.'

'Yes,' he said. Poor Hubert ! how haggard he looked ! 'I think Kitty will like to have you with her. One thing I forgot : she wants to see the children before they go to bed. Nurse shall tell you when she is ready ; but she is too much exhausted now.'

It was Girlie's bedtime, and she was growing rather sleepy and cross. Jane undressed her ; and we told her stories to keep her awake—at least Mab did, for I could not utter a word. She sat curled up on my lap looking drowsily at the fire, with her tumbled curly locks shining like gold.

When the message came I was obliged to carry her in myself, for she would not let nurse touch her.

'Girlie won't,' she said crossly, in return to all her overtures.

Nurse doted on her. Wilfred looked rather solemn as he walked beside me ; and the twins were hand-in-hand as usual. What a sight for a mother ! I saw a spasm cross Kitty's wan face.

'All but dear little Hugh,' she whispered. 'Give him his mother's blessing, Hubert ;' then more faintly : 'Let me kiss my baby, Olga.'

'Girlie wants to come to bed with mother,' cried the little one eagerly, as she patted and stroked her mother's face.

Hubert signed to me to take her away ; and he himself led the other children to the bed. Willie said nothing ; but Jessie began to cry when she saw her mother's altered look ; and Mab's features twitched ominously as she bade her hush.

'God bless you, my darlings !' gasped Kitty. 'Mab, be good to your father, and help Aunt Olga,—Hubert !'

That sad, appealing tone told him she could bear no more. He leant over her, as though to shut out that little clinging group, so unutterably pathetic, from her sight. 'He shall gather the lambs with His arms, and carry them in His bosom,' I heard him say, for day and night he comforted her sinking soul with some such cordial as this.

I left the room with the children, partly to recover myself, and partly because Jessie was sobbing so that I could not leave her; she was a sensitive, tender-hearted child, and of all the children she most resembled her mother. Mab put her arm round her neck and began to cry too; and then, to my astonishment, Jem came out of the schoolroom and confronted us.

'Jem! Impossible! Hubert's telegram only went an hour ago.'

'I did not wait for the telegram,' he returned gravely. 'Vivian wrote and said they feared it might happen any time, so I got leave at once. Hubert must not be alone. Have the children all been in?'

'Yes, she wished it; but it is too much for her. Jessie, please, please do not cry so!'

'What shall you do now?'

'I must put the children to bed. Jane is busy. Then I am going in again.'

'I shall wait for you; don't be longer than you can help.'

And Jem sat down by the fire gloomily. I asked if he had had any refreshment, but he took no notice of my question; so I left the children, and went down to Harry, who was walking up and down the drawing-room rather restlessly, as though he did not quite know what to do with himself, and asked him to look after Jem, and he promised with alacrity to do so. Willie and Girlie were soon fast asleep, but I did not find it easy to leave the twins: they were both sitting up in bed, with their arms round each other, crying as though their hearts would break.

'Mother is going to die,' Jessie kept saying; and Mab was no better. But presently they consented to lie down, on my promising to come to them again.

'Mother wants Aunt Olga, and we mustn't keep her,' said Mab, whose quickness had grasped the situation.

I was longing indeed to go back, and Jem followed me without a word. Hubert did not seem surprised to see him. I think he was beyond feeling.

'Jem is here, love,' he said quietly; and Kitty opened her eyes; a faint smile came to her lips.

'Dear old Jem!' she whispered, as he kissed her; and then

she held his hand. 'Be good to Hubert. Look after him;' and a sort of sob answered her.

She did not take any notice of me for a long time; but by and by, when Hubert gave her a restorative—for that last night he would allow no one else to give her anything—I heard her say, 'Where is Olga?' and then for a minute he did yield his place to me.

'Remember everything,' she said, in a voice so low no one else heard her. 'You have been so good to me—a real sister! God reward you for it;' and she signed to me to kiss her.

I think I was going to say something to her, to ask her again to forgive me—for even in the presence of the dying we think of ourselves—but Jem drew me away.

'That is Hubert's place,' he said in my ear; 'we must not be in his way.'

But I suppose he felt how I trembled, for he kept his arm round me, and that comforted me a little. I do not know how the time passed. Now and then Hubert said a prayer, or a text or two; but there were few words spoken. Nurse moved quietly about the room. Once Hubert bade her light some more candles. Kitty had murmured something about darkness. Later on she called him feebly.

'I am here, love, close beside you.'

'Yes, I know; but I am going now, darling—dear, dearest husband!'

She turned her face to him, but as he stooped over her, in his love and anguish, she gasped: 'Pray! pray!'

I saw him move his lips in answer, but no sound came from them. A broken voice near me responded: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.'

It was Jem!

I do not know how I got out of the room. I think nurse begged me to go; but I found myself sitting by the gray ashes of the schoolroom fire. The lamp had long ago burnt out, but some one had left a guttering kitchen candle on the table. I never felt anything like the chill of that February morning. I could hear my teeth chattering from inward and outward cold.

My own loneliness appalled me. Jem was with Hubert. Nurse and Jane were busy in that room—another shiver at that thought. The children—poor little creatures!—were all asleep. And I—I had no one but my faithful Rollo, who was sitting at my feet, every now and then uttering a low whine of sympathy, or trying to lick my face.

The first gleam of comfort came when cook entered with her apron full of wood and paper, and proceeded to light the fire. As I crept nearer to the blaze, and stretched my numb hands over it, I felt somewhat revived.

'You do look mortal bad, to be sure, Miss Olga!' observed cook, with the frankness peculiar to her class. 'Mr. Vivian asked me just now to make you a cup of tea, and I will bring it you in a moment; it is close upon four o'clock, and Mr. Jem has only just got master out of that room.'

I made no answer; but when she brought me the tea I drank it. I had never before felt that peculiar craving for warmth that I felt then. It seemed so strange to be satisfying one's physical needs at such a time; but if cook had been an angel of light, I could not have blessed her more than I did for lighting that fire. I found afterwards that Harry had told her to do it. By and by Jem came in and took the chair beside me. He did not speak to me, nor I to him; but I put my head on his shoulder—as I had not done since we were children together—and so we sat for a long time.

I asked him, presently, where Hubert was.

'He is in there,' he replied; and his voice sounded so tired. 'Nurse has finished now. He will not hear of going to bed—he says he must stop there with Kitty. I don't know how to manage him,' finished Jem dejectedly; 'I suppose we must let him do as he likes.'

I begged Jem to go to bed; but he said it was not worth while, it was past five; but he thought he would lie down for a little, and made me promise to do the same. I did not want to leave the fire, but Jem's stronger will prevailed as usual. As I crept under my eider-down quilt, I told myself that it would be impossible to sleep; and then I knew no more until some one touched me, and I saw nurse's kind, motherly face bending over me.

'You have had a fine sleep, Miss Olga dear,' she said. 'It is close upon ten o'clock, and I have brought you your breakfast. Mr. Jem and Mr. Vivian had theirs with the children.'

'And my poor brother?'

'Oh, master has just fallen asleep by the study fire, and Mr. Jem says no one must wake him. No one could be more considerate than Mr. Jem is, for all he is so young. He has been telling the children—poor Miss Jessie is making herself quite sick with crying for her mamma—but he has been talking to her so nicely. Now you will get up as soon as you have had your breakfast, won't you, Miss Olga? for you and me have a deal to

consult about.' And of course I understood her meaning. Oh, these miserable formalities and conventionalities that tread on the heel of affliction!

I stole into the room to see Kitty before I went to the children. It was only just five weeks since I stood beside Aline. How different our dear Kitty looked; Aline's grand, marble-like beauty had resembled sleep more than death! but Kitty's worn, thin little face looked very sweet—indeed, she looked almost like a child. Flowers had come down from the Hall already—beautiful hot-house flowers lay on the quilt; some lilies of the valley—her favourite flowers—lay in the white fingers. I could not stay there long. I knelt down and said a prayer for Hubert, and then I went into the schoolroom. Jessie and Mab were in the big armchair, and Willie was turning over a picture-book with *Girlie* on the rug. The poor little girls clung to me, and Mab's first piteous words were for her father.

'Mayn't we see father, auntie?'

I stayed with them a little while, and then went in search of nurse. I was very ignorant and helpless, but nurse was full of resources. We arranged, at last, that she should buy the materials for the children's frocks, and that she should send the dressmaker to take my order.

'You need not trouble, Miss Olga,' she said soothingly. 'Miss Nicholls and I will manage things; and Jane will give us a helping hand.' And then I went down to the drawing-room and wrote to Aunt Catherine; and by and by Jem came to me.

I did not see Hubert until late in the afternoon; and then Jem sent me.

'You had better get it over,' he said. 'You need not say much to him—no one can do him good, poor old fellow!'

Poor Hubert! It nearly broke my heart to see him sitting there with his face hidden in his hands, and his great Bible beside him. When he raised his head, and I saw how white and sad his face looked, I could only put my arms round his neck, and kiss him again and again.

'Thank you,' he said very quietly, far more quietly than I expected. 'You and Jem are very good! How—how are the children?'

'Very unhappy, poor little darlings! Mab wants to see you.'

He rose from his chair, and walked a few steps rather feebly, and then sat down again.

'Not to-day. Give my love to them. Ask them to pray for their poor father. I am too weak to see them to-day. I must be alone with God and my Kitty.'

What could I say? I only kissed him again, and went back to Jem; but I could hardly tell him what had passed for my tears.

'We must leave him in quiet to-day,' returned Jem. 'It is not only grief: his bad nights have worn him out; he is as weak as a child. Dr. Langham says we must feed him up, and give him plenty of good, strong beef-tea, or he will not be fit for his work for a long time. Montague came up, hoping to see him, but we were obliged to refuse him. I have had to ask him a few necessary questions, that is all.'

Hubert saw the children the next day. Willie and Girlie went to him before he was up, and he sent for the twins later. Jem told me that he found them sitting in the study. Mab was standing with her arm round her father's neck, and Jessie was on the stool at his feet. They did not seem to be talking, but they all looked quiet and composed. In the evening poor little Hugh arrived, and Hubert rang his bell and desired that he should come to him at once. No one saw that meeting, but they were a long time together, and though the poor boy's eyes were red with crying when he came out, he only said, 'Father had talked so beautifully to him.'

I narrated all those particulars to Aunt Catherine; I knew how she would love to hear them. She wrote the dearest letters in return. She and Mr. Basil wanted to come up for the funeral, but Jem begged them to do no such thing; he said Hubert would not hear of it; that he was sure of their sympathy without that; that his Kitty needed nothing more from any one.

Aunt Catherine wrote again the next day. She said that for Basil's sake she was much relieved; he was just recovering his spirits a little, and that it would be exceedingly painful for him to enter that churchyard again so soon, under such circumstances; that her sister had caught cold, and was not as well as usual; and as Marsden was away for a fortnight's holiday, she was much tied on the invalid and Reggie's account. But, all the same, she would have come if I had expressed a wish to see her.

But her kindness did not stop here; lovely flowers came every day from the Hall, until dear Kitty's room looked like a bower; and on the morning of the funeral three superb wreaths arrived from Hastings, one of them from Mr. Basil.

We all followed Kitty to her resting-place, with the exception of our little Flo. Willie held my hand, and Hugh walked beside Hubert. Jem had the little girls.

I had a vague idea that the church and churchyard were crowded—that we walked between rows of sympathising faces.

Harry told me afterwards that every one, even the poorest, had a black ribbon or a little bit of crape. They sang Kitty's favourite hymn—the one she loved most to hear—'For all the saints who from their labour rest.' The words seemed to calm our grief:

'The golden evening brightens in the west ;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest ;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.'

Poor, weary little warrior! for her the rest had come none too soon. No more would Kitty's failing strength try to perform the tasks she felt so hard ; no more would infirmities vex her and jar on her loving nature. The weary, sorely-tried wife and mother had gone home. 'And I must live without her,' were Hubert's first words, as he entered his desolate home.

'Father, you have us,' whispered Mab, who heard this ; and she took his hand and kissed it.

Hubert caught her in his arms and burst into tears. He had not shed a tear before, Jem told me. We left him with all the children round him. Jem drew me away and shut the door. 'Leave them together, Olga ; Kitty's children will be his best comforters.'

And I believe Jem was right.

CHAPTER XLII

COOK SPOILS THE FISH

‘From an old English parsonage down by the sea
There came in the twilight this message to me ;
Its quaint Saxon legend, deeply engraven,
Hath, as it seems to me, teaching for heaven,
And on through the hours the quaint words ring,
Like a low inspiration, “ Doe the nexte thyng.”’

Anon.

THE Dean of Exeter was a friend of Hubert’s, and Jem found no difficulty in procuring extension of leave. He remained with us about ten days, and when he left he cheered me, as well as himself, with the thought that the Easter vacation would bring him back in less than five weeks. We both of us thought that Aunt Catherine would come home long before that. But we were wrong ; the octave of Easter was over before the Hall party returned.

Mrs. Lyndhurst was the cause of the delay. Her cold had proved serious—it had turned to pleurisy ; and Marsden’s holiday had ended abruptly.

Happily, they were established in most comfortable lodgings in Cavendish Square ; in fact, they were in possession of the whole house ; so Mrs. Lyndhurst did not miss her home-comforts. There was an excellent doctor ; the mistress of the house was kind and considerate ; and, except during the first few days of the illness, Aunt Catherine did not seem either worried or anxious.

Mrs. Lyndhurst threw off the attack fairly well, but she continued weak for some time ; and until she regained her strength it was not possible for them to return to the Hall.

Aunt Catherine’s letters grew more and more cheerful. ‘His mother’s illness has done Basil a world of good,’ she wrote. ‘His own trouble was drawing them very closely together ; but

now his anxiety for her has broken down the last barrier. He is no longer reserved with her; he talks to her as freely as he does to me; and there is no word to express Virginia's happiness. Marsden declares she gets younger every day. She spoils Reggie dreadfully. Whenever we refuse him anything, the little rogue says, "I will go and ask Gran." He has broken himself of his baby way of saying Reggie will do this and that. He says he is a big boy now. One thing he never forgets—"my Dear." I hope you will not lose that name, Olga; it is so pretty and quaint.'

I used to sigh as I put away these letters. How quietly happy they all seemed! Presently I heard Mr. Fleming had joined them for five days—that was just before Holy Week. Aunt Catherine did not write until he had gone back to Leeds. She said very little about his visit, except that Basil and he had taken long walks together, and that he looked very well. She talked more about me and my concerns, and was full of inquiries about Hubert and the children.

When I look back on those weeks that followed dear Kitty's death, I seem only to remember the dull weight with which I woke, day after day, as though the sense of responsibility never left me even in my sleep. No wonder I grew thin and tired! and, oh! how I wanted Jem and Aunt Catherine!

I tried not to fret at the loss of Kitty, but I missed her more every day. I had no idea how much I had loved her until I lost her daily companionship; and if I felt this, what must Hubert's grief have been? The sight of his sad, patient face, day after day, was the worst part of my trouble.

If I could only have lightened it a little. But a great sorrow is always environed with loneliness; human sympathy is sweet, but it has its limits. None of us could help Hubert.

Jem and Mr. Montague had begged him to go away for a change, and Mr. Basil had written in Aunt Catherine's name, imploring him to be their guest. His mother was ill; but there were rooms to spare in the house. He should have a sitting-room to himself. The sea-air would do him good; and he could bring Wilfred as a playfellow for Reggie. It was a kind thought, and Jem and I urged him to go; but Hubert would not hear of it.

'I am well enough,' he said, with a dreary smile; 'nothing ails me. It is better to stay and do my work. Things are bad enough, God knows! but coming home again and not finding her here would be worse;' and then Jem said reluctantly that we must leave him alone.

It was dreadful to see him trying to take up his life again, and doing everything from a sheer sense of duty. Mr. Montague spared

him as much as possible; but after the first fortnight Hubert resumed his old duties, going about the parish, reading with Harry, and preparing his sermons. I used to think he had never preached so well.

But the strain of the day's work told on him, and in the evening he was fit for nothing but to sit quietly in his study.

Harry and I often spent the evening together. I do not think it ever entered Hubert's head that such a state of things might be awkward; Harry was so much one of ourselves, and Hubert looked on him as a boy. I did the best I could under the circumstances. I made Harry read to me while I worked, and I encouraged him to go out as much as possible by representing that Mr. Montague must be dull alone in his lodgings. When Harry took this hint, I used to carry my work into the study, and sit there until bedtime.

I have no idea if my presence were a comfort to Hubert; he seldom talked to me—never about Kitty—his wound was too recent and too deep for words. But when I bade him good-night, he always thanked me; so I suppose the intention pleased him.

During the day the twins followed him about. Mab used to dust and arrange his papers, and Jessie kept his flower-vases filled. He could talk better to them. Once, when I wanted to ask him a question, I found him sitting in the twilight with the little girls one on each side of him. Jessie's cheek was pressed against her father's, and Mab's head was on his shoulder.

'Mother was very fond of you, father dear,' I heard Mab say; 'she wouldn't like to see you cry—would she, Jessie?'

Hubert started a little when he saw me.

'I am so sorry to interrupt you,' I faltered; 'but Mr. Gregson has called with his bill, and he said he must be paid,' and so on, and so on.

Hubert listened to me very patiently, and gave me the money. He was wonderfully gentle, and tried hard not to let me see how my inexperience troubled him after Kitty's wise management. Sometimes he would tell me wearily to ask nurse.

'I am afraid I don't know about things as I ought,' he said once; 'my darling did everything herself. She would never let me be troubled—that is how she tired herself out—but nothing ever went wrong.'

I am ashamed to say how I cried over this little speech, and yet it was so natural for Hubert to say it. I pitied him so for having no one but a girl to help him, and yet Kitty had been young once!

Nurse found me sobbing like a baby, and comforted me as she

would have comforted Willie or Girlie. She even gave me a motherly kiss as I put my head on her shoulder.

'You must not fret, Miss Olga dear; fretting never helped any one. You are doing as nicely as possible, and it stands to reason you cannot be as experienced as the mistress—bless her!—for she had been learning master's ways nigh upon thirteen years. She was only a young thing when her first baby was born—the one before Master Hugh—and she had a deal to learn, both she and master. She has often laughed about the mistakes they made the first year they were married.'

Nurse was always a comfortable person. She had plenty of common-sense, and knew exactly what to say. Jem and I used to laugh at her sometimes because her panacea for every ailment, mental or bodily, was a cup of tea. She coaxed me into the nursery on the present occasion, and produced the inevitable little black teapot, and really, after a cup of tea and a little more talk, I felt quite cheered.

There is generally a difficult person in every household, and ours was cook. She was simply aggravating at times. Cook was really a very capable servant; she was a respectable woman, and had known better days. So had nurse; but unhappily cook had a temper, and a very curious one into the bargain. If an order coincided with her private opinion, it would be carried out to the letter; if, on the contrary, it disagreed with her, as she phrased it, it was simply neglected, or else done as badly as possible.

Kitty knew this peculiarity, and humoured her by pretending to consult her on the daily bill of fare, and cook fell into the trap. I never heard of any contretemps except once when cook declared peas were not in season, and when Kitty proved her wrong by showing her a basket of early young peas from the Hall garden. Cook revenged herself by boiling them until they came to the table more like green-pea soup than anything else. Hubert was so disappointed, for they were his favourite vegetable, that Kitty, who also had a temper, went down and gave her warning on the spot; but they made it up afterwards, and cook remained in triumph.

'I am not denying, Miss Olga,' nurse said as she made the tea, 'that cook is one of the most aggravating women I know. But, bless you! many people have tempers that want humouring. If you only know how to take her, she will go on as quiet as a lamb.'

'But she spoiled the fish,' I returned dolefully, 'and my brother had no luncheon'—for it was Friday in Lent, and Hubert never ate meat on that day; 'and it is cruel, wicked on cook's

part to be in her airs and spoil the one thing he can eat; he had nothing but potatoes and bread, for he did not care about the pudding. It makes me wretched to think what Kitty would say to us if she saw him so neglected. And she has cooked all the fish, and there will be nothing but eggs for his dinner.'

'Well, if I were you, Miss Olga, I would just leave things alone for the day. Master shan't suffer, for I will beat him up some eggs and sherry before he goes to bed, and he won't starve in one day. Cook is in her tantrums because Eliza is out, and scolding would only make her worse.'

Eliza was the girl who helped Jane. She assisted in the housework and waiting at table. A boy came in to clean the knives and boots and fill the coal-scuttles. When the three pupils were here the servants had a great deal to do. Cook cleaned the gentlemen's study, but there were Hubert's study, and the dining-room, and drawing-room, and the schoolroom, for nurse kept entirely to the nursery. The nursery was very little used now; only nurse worked there. Fircroft was a large house, so no wonder Kitty and I found enough to do in supplementing the servants' work.

I took nurse's advice, and I am very glad I did so, for even cook's temper had not been proof against the account that Jane carried down of master's lunching on potatoes and bread. I never knew how she managed, but at dinner-time there were lobster cutlets—probably tinned—and a delicious dish of twice laid fish, that Hubert found very appetising. I think he was as much surprised as I was when a savoury omelet made its appearance afterwards. Mr. Montague was dining with us, and he remarked that we had an excellent cook. Hubert looked at me and smiled. He had remembered my appeal to him to send cook away because I could do nothing with her.

Cook behaved better after this, and I learned presently how to manage her. Instead of writing out the menu overnight, according to my own ideas, I took her into counsel, and only suggested things. This answered admirably. I found she knew Hubert's favourite dishes better than I did, and the bill of fare was generally satisfactory.

I tried hard to get into methodical ways. I rose early, and had the children to read with me and repeat their texts while I finished dressing. When my trying interview with cook was over, and I had looked in at nurse and Girlie, I went to the schoolroom. The twins were always ready for me. Willie came in later. We worked until twelve o'clock, and then I took them out until luncheon. After their early dinner they generally worked with nurse, and went out again with her, unless their father took

them with him. I was always busy in the afternoon writing letters for Hubert, or doing little things for him in the parish; or very often we had callers. Somehow I never seemed to have time to open a book. There was always so much work to do—little garments to make for the children; for nurse spent a great deal of her time in mending for them, and Kitty's clever fingers were missing. Harry seemed to think I worked too much; he used to beg me to put it away and play chess or some game with him. We did not like to touch the piano until Hubert asked us to do so. As the next best thing, he read to me—in fact, I should have feared much worse but for Harry.

When Jem came home, things were better; for he would threaten to lock up the workbasket in his cupboard unless I went out with him.

'Bother Willie's shirts!' he would say; 'let him wait for them. It is far too fine to stay indoors. I am going over to Braidley for Hubert, and you and Rollo had better come too;' and, as usual, he had his way. But I did not get through half so much work when Jem was at home.

Jem had been with us for more than a fortnight, before Aunt Catherine wrote to say they were really coming home at last. Mr. Basil had been to Leeds again, and had only just returned, and he seemed in a hurry to get home. It was the end of April, and the young lambs were frisking about in the meadows round the Hall, when I went across to see that everything was ready for the travellers. I went into every room. How fresh and bright it all looked! The whole house was fragrant with hot-house flowers. There were even some in the Lady's Room; Mr. Basil had not had it shut up. The only change was that Reggie now slept in his father's room.

I sat down a long time in the cushioned window-seat, looking down the still, sunny avenue. The rooks were busier than ever: they had evidently nursery cares on their mind. Their cawing seemed more jubilant than usual.

As I sat there, I thought how Aline's listless figure had occupied this very place that first morning after her arrival. I could even recall the intent look of her face as she sat watching Reggie at his play. Poor Aline! What a strange intimacy ours had been! and yet, brief as it was, I felt I should never forget her. Even now whole sentences came to my memory, little speeches she had made about herself, her husband—a hundred things. In spite of her defective culture, there had been a marked individuality about her, that impressed itself even on her words. She had often interested me, and had made me look at things

from a new aspect. But for her inherited infirmity—for the failing that had embittered her short life—she would have been a grand woman.

At this point in my reflections, I was aware of a tall figure coming up the avenue. For the moment I thought it was Jem, but Jem never held his head like that, neither did he walk with those swift, even strides. I started from my seat, forgetting that I should only bring myself more in view. The next moment Mr. Basil looked up and saw me, and I had to return his bow. They were not expected for hours—what could have brought him there alone? Would he not wonder to see me in that room? True, Aunt Catherine had asked me to attend to several little things; but Mr. Basil would not know that. I felt vexed to be discovered in the Lady's Room; but there was no escape possible—the hall-door was open, the servants were at their dinner, and he was already coming upstairs.

I stood awkwardly enough, thinking how I should excuse myself; but he evidently thought no excuse was necessary. He came in quickly, and I could see at once how pleased he was to see me there. He held out both his hands, and shook mine warmly. I thought he looked older and somehow different, but so well and brown, though, after the first greeting, his gravity returned—perhaps at the sight of my black dress.

'I could not believe my eyes,' he said at once, 'when I looked up and saw you at that window.'

'You must have been surprised,' I returned, colouring. 'Aunt Catherine wrote to me, and asked me to do one or two things for her, so I came across early. I had finished, and was sitting down to rest for a minute—the surprise was quite as great on my side.'

'I suppose so,' looking a little amused at my long explanation. 'I did not cheat myself with the delusion that you were there to welcome me home; but, all the same, I had no idea anything so pleasant was awaiting me.'

'But what made you come back alone?'

I did not feel a bit at my ease standing there talking to him, with no one near us. I should have been far more friendly and unrestrained if he had come to us at Fircroft. I fancied he saw my embarrassment, for he looked away from me as he answered.

'I was in town last night; our lawyer wanted to see me yesterday, so I dined with him. As I had nothing particular to do this morning, I thought I would come on here, and look about me before the others arrived. You cannot tell how glad I am to

be home again, Miss Leigh !' and, indeed, his voice said he was glad—very glad indeed.

'You have been away a long time.'

'A very long time ; but it has done my mother good. I think you will hardly know her, she looks so young and brisk. And Aunt Catherine is well, too.'

'And Reggie ?'

'Oh ! he is growing fat ; he is not a bit like the delicate little chap who gave us so much trouble at St. Croix. I must soon think of sending him to school—fancy Reg at Eton !' but, of course, he was joking. Then, with a complete change of manner : 'I do not know what Aunt Catherine will say when she sees you, Miss Leigh ; you have grown much thinner ;' and then he added in a low voice : 'I suppose you have been taking care of everybody and neglecting yourself, as usual.'

It was the old kind voice, and he was looking so attentively at me, as though he saw some change that grieved him. I felt myself blush as I answered hastily :

'Oh, you have never seen me in black before—black always makes me look so pale !'

'Do you think it is that ?' in a tone of relief. 'No, I have never seen you in black. You were always in white at La Maissonnette. Do you remember that morning when you ran across the sands to bring Reggie his cap ?—it was just by the washing-pool—but you were not in white that morning ; it was something gray and soft.'

How strange that he should remember the colour of my dress ! But, pleasant as it was, I could not stay there any longer talking to him.

'Mr. Basil,' I said rather shyly, 'it is the children's dinner-hour, and I must go ; and I am just thinking that you will be hungry after your journey—why not have luncheon with us at Fircroft ?'

'I should like it, of all things !' he returned eagerly ; 'but I am afraid Mr. Leigh would think it an intrusion.'

'Oh no ! Hubert sees people now, and Jem is at home, and there is Mr. Vivian—I am quite sure that they will be pleased to see you.'

'Then, in that case, I will come,' he replied, 'and I think it very good of you to ask me ;' and then we went down into the hall, and passed out into the sunshiny avenue.

'Isn't it a lovely old place ?' he said, standing still for a minute. 'I thought so as I turned in at the gate just now. Do you know, I had a regular fit of home-sickness, and then nothing

would do but to come home. I think I am cured of my love of wandering. I mean to settle down into a regular English squire, and dwell among my own people.'

'And Reggie is to go to Eton?'

'Oh yes! but we will not talk of that now, please; the little chap is not going just yet.'

And then, becoming grave again, he asked me if the spring flowers were growing nicely on Aline's grave, and described to me the marble cross he had ordered for her.

'Kitty is to have a marble cross too,' I remarked when he had finished. 'Hubert takes more interest in that than anything.'

'How strange that he and I should be in the same circumstances!' he said, with a sigh; 'but our cases are dissimilar.'

And then we came to the gate of Fircroft, and found Jem and Hugh on the look-out for me. Jem seemed much surprised to see Mr. Basil, but he gave him a cordial welcome, and sent Hugh to fetch his father. I could not wait to see their meeting. I ran upstairs to take off my hat, and then hurried to put a few finishing touches to the luncheon-table; and then they all came in and took their places, except Girlie, who still dined with nurse.

I saw Mr. Basil glance at them; the little girls looked so pretty in their black frocks and muslin bib-aprons. They always sat beside their father, and Willie by me. When Mr. Basil took the seat beside me, he said in a low voice:

'This is the first time I have been your guest, Miss Leigh;' and Jem glanced at him quickly, as though the speech reached him.

It was a very quiet meal; all our meals were quiet now—for no one could talk much with Hubert sitting there so sad and silent; but on the present occasion he exerted himself more than usual, and Jem and Harry did their utmost to help him. Hubert dropped out of the conversation presently, and then Mr. Basil talked to Jem about Oxford; their talk lasted until luncheon was over, and then Hubert muttered some excuse, and went to the study, and Mr. Basil followed us into the drawing-room.

He asked Jem to go back with him to the Hall, as the ladies were not expected until seven, and Jem accepted the invitation with alacrity. He ran off to find Harry, and give him some message or other; and the moment Mr. Basil found himself alone with me, he took a seat near my work-table—for I had taken up some childish garment or other; I think it was a shirt for Willie—and said quickly:

'Is that how you spend your time? I hope Jem does not let you do too much of that.'

I smiled at his anxious tone.

'Jem does his best to hinder me ; but, as I tell him, some one must do the work.'

'And there is no one but you now ?'

'Oh yes ! Nurse does a great deal. You must not think I am overworked. There are the children's lessons in the morning, and——'

'What ! you do those too ?' with an astonished air.

'Certainly. I teach Mab and Jessie, and Willie comes to me now.'

'It is too much ; it is far too much,' he replied, so seriously that I found myself smiling at his earnestness. 'No wonder you do not look like the same girl ! No, and you are not the same'—rather vehemently.

'I feel very much the same, thank you,' trying to turn his words into jest.

'No ; you are quite different. I do not seem to recognise you,' with quite a troubled air. 'This is not the Olga Leigh who ran across the sands in her white gown, whom I used to hear singing in the garden of La Maissonnette ; this is not Reggie's smiling lady at all.'

I tried to answer lightly ; but something impeded my breath. He was looking at me so gently that I could not bear it. A tear dropped on my work. He leant forward almost in agitation.

'Oh,' he said, 'please do not cry ! I shall never forgive myself if I have made you shed a tear in the first hour of my return. You look as though you have shed far too many already.'

'You should not talk so,' I replied, trying to check them. 'You speak to me so kindly, and that upsets me. It has been such a dreary time ; and then poor Hubert !'

'Ah ! he is changed ; he is terribly changed. It gave me quite a shock to see him. He looks like a man who has lost all pleasure in life. Yes, I see ; he has made you all suffer.'

'But he is so good ! Mr. Basil, I never knew before how good Hubert is. He is struggling to bear this for all our sakes—for the children, and because he knows it is his duty.'

'I think duty is the Leighs' watchword,' he returned, with a smile.

And then Jem came in. Of course he saw at once that I had been crying. Not that that was an unusual proceeding on my part now, only he did not seem quite pleased that I should have given way before Mr. Basil. Happily, Mr. Basil saw his inquisitive glance, and answered it with his old frankness.

'You must discharge the vials of your wrath on my head,

Leigh,' he said. 'I have made your sister cry by touching on a painful subject.' And then, of course, Jem thought we had been talking about Kitty; and his brow cleared at once.

'Well, you see, Fircroft is not the most cheerful abode at present,' he returned gruffly. Jem was always gruff when he was feeling things most. 'My brother is terribly cut up; and the children do a good deal of fretting at times, so Olga has her hands full. But I will give her her due; she does her best. By the bye,' turning on me, 'what are you going to do this afternoon?'

'I shall finish my work, and then——'

'Oh, you will, will you?' and Jem deftly snatched the little shirt and tucked it under his arm. 'Well, you will not see this again for a good twenty-four hours, unless you are clever in picking locks; so, as it is a fine afternoon, I should recommend you to take Rollo and the twins for an airing.'

'Why not have the carriage round and take all the children to pick primroses in Braitley Wood?' returned Mr. Basil quickly. 'Would that not be a happy thought, Leigh? The carriage has only to go down to the station at half-past six;' and, as Jem expressed himself charmed with the idea, they both hurried off to give the order.

The children were in ecstasies when I told them to get ready; and, as the carriage was large, we took nurse too, for Harry had gone for a walk with Mr. Montague. I never saw Rollo more excited; even his long run beside the carriage did not sober him in the least. He was puppy-like in his gambols, and indulged in such vagaries, while Mab and Jessie picked their primroses, that I sat down on a bank and lectured him.

'Rollo,' I said severely, 'I really must reprimand your foolish behaviour. You have knocked my hat off twice by putting your great clumsy paws on my shoulders, and behaving like a ridiculous puppy instead of a sensible, middle-aged dog.'

Here Rollo looked foolish, and tendered me a paw, with his great tongue lolling out of his mouth.

'Don't be hard on him, poor old chap!' and there was Jem grinning at me over the hedge, with Mr. Basil behind him.

I was so surprised at the sudden apparition that I sat perfectly still, which gave Rollo the opportunity of knocking my hat off for the third time; after which he gave a rallying bark and darted off in search of Jem. It was Mr. Basil who brought me back my hat.

'We thought the walk would be pleasanter than lounging about the garden and stables, so we made up our minds to follow you. Is that Mab or Jessie laughing? How I wish the little chap were

here! Do you know,' planting himself straight before me and looking rather wicked, 'I am glad I have come, after all.'

'Why?—to help the children pick primroses?'

'No; but because I have seen Reggie's smiling lady again;'
and after this speech he had the grace to take himself off.

CHAPTER XLIII

AN AFTERMATH

' I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right ;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears of all my life !—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.'

E. B. BROWNING.

I OPENED my eyes the next morning with a feeling that something pleasant had happened, or was about to happen. For the first time since dear Kitty's death, I woke without that sense of crushing weight. A little bird was singing in the ivy under the window, and something like enjoyment was stirring at my heart, for to-day I should see Aunt Catherine and Reggie.

I lay for a few minutes to enjoy these new sensations, instead of thinking over cook's last transgression, or the amount of my weekly bills—the chief heads of my matutinal meditations. I thought of our afternoon in Braidley Wood. The children's baskets had been filled to overflowing before the carriage came round for them. Just at the last moment, Mr. Basil asked if there were room for him and Jem, and the twins begged him eagerly to come between them. It ended by Jem and Hugh going outside, and Jessie being squeezed in between me and nurse. Willie and Girlie were on our laps, and I think, crowded as we were, we all enjoyed our drive home that spring evening.

Just as we were passing the churchyard, Mab asked, with a quiver of her lip, if she might give some of her primroses to dear mother.

Mr. Basil, who heard her, called at once to Jennings to stop, and Jem, who had no notion of our errand, touched his hat like Reynolds, as he appeared at the carriage-door, which made Jessie giggle. But he was rather sorry for his little joke when Mr. Basil explained matters, and we all went into the churchyard very gravely; and Mr. Basil and I helped the children tie up their little bunches.

'We must give Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst some too,' Mab whispered to me presently; and as I tied up a small bunch of primroses, she took hold of Mr. Basil's hand.

'This is for your grave,' she said in her pretty way. 'Your wife will like them, will she not? And mother has plenty. Aunt Olga tied up these. Look, she has put some violets with them—they smell so sweet.'

'Let me come too,' exclaimed Jessie, taking his other hand; and they led him off between them, talking to him all the time. Jem and I waited for them.

Aline's grave was sweet with spring flowers. A freshly-made cross I had placed there yesterday lay in the middle.

Mab was still chattering as they returned from their little pilgrimage.

'You talk more than father,' she was saying. 'Father hardly ever speaks—does he, Jessie?—but he likes us to kiss him. There are so many gray hairs in his beard—are you getting gray, too, Mr. Lyndhurst?'

Jem said something under his breath, and then checked Mab by telling her it was very late.

'I must go to the station,' observed Mr. Basil.

He had become very grave all at once. He bade us good-bye rather hastily at the churchyard gate, and jumped into the carriage, and we followed more slowly.

Mab and Jessie arranged the rest of the primroses in their father's study, and Hugh helped them. His writing-table was covered with them.

'Look, father!' exclaimed Mab, when they had finished; and Hubert took off his spectacles.

'Are those all for me, my darling? Are there none for Aunt Olga and Uncle Jem?'

'Aunt Olga does not want them so badly as you do, father, so we kept them for you and mother. We always went primrose-gathering for mother, because she loved them so. Do you remember, father?'

Remember! I saw him sit down and cover his eyes with his shaking hand. The children did not know, and I had forgotten

what Kitty had once told me : that she had first met Hubert at a primrose-gathering, and that he had stayed by her all the afternoon, and had helped her fill her basket. I took the children away—for I saw Hubert could bear no more—and I told them about it softly as we sat by the nursery fire.

Jessie cried, as she always did ; but Mab's brown eyes looked large and solemn.

'I am glad you told us that, Aunt Olga—and Hugh is glad too—are you not, Hugh? Now we shall always put primroses on mother's grave. Father told us one Sunday evening that mother has nicer flowers where she is ; and he says she is ever so much prettier. Don't you wish we were with her, Aunt Olga?—where the flowers never fade and people never look sad! Father makes me ache all over when he looks as he did just now. Doesn't it make you ache too, Hughie?'

It was of all this I was thinking as I dressed myself, and it was no wonder that I was a little late, and kept Mab and Jessie waiting for their reading. We had just finished, and I was opening the window, when Rollo barked, and gave a long scratch at the door—which was an unusual proceeding on his part, for he was generally waiting on the hall-mat to wish me good-morning.

Mab flew to the door, and there was my darling Reggie smiling at us with a great bouquet in his hands ; he darted into my arms, flowers and all, and gave me a good many kisses.

'They are for you, my Dear,' he said, with his arms tight round my neck. 'Father picked them, and I was to give them with Reggie's love—they are mine and father's, that is what they are'—for Reggie's grammar was still defective. 'Father said they were all mine, but he picked them every one.'

I put the flowers in water, and then gave my undivided attention to Reggie. He was prettier than ever, though he was very much grown, and his black suit made him look older. In his childish way he seemed as glad to see me as I was to see him ; he kept beside me, and chattered to me about his pony and Joe. Joe was in disgrace because he had eaten a sparrow, and Reggie had put him into the corner. He stopped to breakfast, and helped to put sugar in all the cups, and made himself as busy as possible ; and I was so happy to see him there amongst all the children.

'Well, young jackanapes,' observed Jem, who delighted to tease any child, 'what are you going to do after breakfast—learn lessons with Mab and Jessie?'

'I am going to the Hall with my Dear,' returned Reggie loftily. 'Aunt Cathy and Gran want her, and father wants her too.'

'Come, come, Reg, that is a little interpolation of your own!' I said, with a conscious blush, because Jem was there to hear his childish nonsense. 'Father never said anything of the kind!'

'Yes, he did,' he replied, with an affronted air. 'You are wrong, my Dear. I used to ask father at Hastings if he did not want to see you, and he always said yes.'

I thought it better to carry away my tea-caddy and hear no more. Cook settled the bill of fare that day. I think if she had proposed the most preposterous dishes—salmon at two shillings a pound and spring chickens—I should hardly have noticed it; I wrote down on the slate all she told me. I was quite relieved at dinner-time, when I found nothing more extraordinary than a boiled leg of mutton and caper sauce had been ordered.

In a little while Reggie and I were walking up the avenue hand-in-hand, but our progress was slow; every now and then a rabbit peeped at us between the trees or scampered off to its burrow, and each time Reggie would persist in standing still to ask me if this Mr. Bunny were related to the French Mrs. Bunny who lived on the common near La Maisonnette—he seemed to think all rabbits belonged to one large family.

'What a lot of children Mrs. Bunny has!' he finished.

I think Mr. Basil was on the look-out for us, for we found him at the hall-door. He said at once that he should take me to his mother.

'I know you are dying to get to Aunt Catherine,' he said, in rather a teasing voice; 'but you must pay your respects to my mother first.'

And, as I saw no way of refusing this, I accompanied him to the drawing-room. I thought it best to say nothing about the flowers—they were intended as Reggie's gift—but on our way I thanked him for sending Reggie.

'Oh, I knew how you were longing to see him!' he said kindly; 'so I thought you should have him all to yourself. It has done you good, I can see that.'

Mrs. Lyndhurst was sitting working by the drawing-room window. She embraced me warmly, and was most affectionate in her manner. I thought I had never seen her look so well: she was less pale; her eyes had a soft, satisfied expression; and with her pretty morning cap just covering her gray hair she looked a handsome, well-preserved gentlewoman. She had quite lost that nervous, shrinking manner that had been so trying. I expressed my surprise at seeing her downstairs so soon; she had never before appeared until luncheon-time.

'It is Basil's tyranny,' she said, looking at him with arch

tenderness ; 'he rules his poor old mother with a rod of iron. He will have it that a change of rooms will be beneficial to me ; and though he has the grace to let me breakfast upstairs, he insisted on establishing me here directly afterwards.'

'Miss Leigh thinks I am right ; you agree with me, do you not ?' turning to me. 'Think of the years my mother has spent in those two rooms. Why, she was a different creature at Hastings ! Both her bedroom and sitting-room commanded a side view of the sea ; and, as long as it was light, she was never weary of looking at it.'

'It was such a complete change,' she said softly. 'Basil was right when he said all those years—for five-and-twenty years I looked out on that avenue, and listened to the rooks cawing : a turn or two in the Lady's Walk, a drive, church, now and then a stroll in our own meadows—that made up my life. I think I was like a child—like Reggie—when I first saw the sea.'

'Yes, and looking on this pleasant lawn is a change too.'

And so they talked on, and every word showed me how wise and thoughtful Mr. Basil was for his mother's comfort ; if he had lived with her all his life, he could not have understood better how to deal with her.

I was fidgeting to get to Aunt Catherine. I suppose Mr. Basil saw this at last, for he broke off in the midst of a description of Fairlight Glen, and said it was time for me to go to her.

'Yes, go, my dear ; I know Catherine is expecting you,' observed Mrs. Lyndhurst.

And then she and Mr. Basil looked at each other and smiled ; but I did not understand what they meant until afterwards. I was only too glad to be set free, and I wished Mr. Basil would not be so formal in his politeness, for he insisted on accompanying me to the library ; and, throwing open the door, with great solemnity said, 'Miss Leigh to see Miss Sefton,' in a sonorous voice that resembled Bennett's.

Dear Aunt Catherine, how I hugged her ! I did not care if there were twenty Mr. Basils standing there, but I found he had speedily shut himself out, and we could hear him whistling for Reggie. Aunt Catherine did not speak for a moment ; but she held my face between her hands, and looked at it earnestly—then she kissed me again.

'My poor little Olga !' she said, in such a pitying tone. 'Yes, Basil is right : you are dwindled somehow, and all the brightness is dimmed ! Never mind, it will all come back ; we have only to be patient ;' and then she made me sit down, and still keeping my hand, began the gentle questioning that was needed before I

could bring myself to relate the experiences of these two months. 'You had better begin from the first,' she said quietly; 'I have the whole morning to devote to you, and we shall not be interrupted—Basil has promised me that. I want to hear all that this poor tired child has had to bear;' and then it all came out.

What a relief to tell it all to that dearest friend—to dwell on every particular, every little failure, and to be sure of her sympathy in return; if I could not always restrain my tears, Aunt Catherine's eyes were not dry either. She listened without interrupting me; but when she spoke her words gave such solid comfort. She spoke so wisely about Hubert, and the necessity of guarding him from any unnecessary worries.

'People say sometimes in these cases,' she continued, 'that little things do not matter; that the greater sorrow deadens the mind to lesser things; but, I assure you, this is not always true. It was the last straw that broke the camel's back, Olga, and these small worries may just make your brother's burden unendurable. Do not let him miss his wife in every detail—he misses her enough without that; try to help him in little ways, by small unobtrusive acts of kindness. He may not notice them; but they will do him good, all the same. You might just as well say he would not miss the comfort of a fire on a winter's day, because he would be just as unhappy when he was warm; but, all the same, the absence of a fire would make him more wretched. So I say to you, take care he has all his accustomed little comforts; keep small vexing worries away from him; and, when you feel able for the effort, show him a cheerful face—there is nothing like the sunshine of a smile.' Oh, was she not a wise woman, this dear Aunt Catherine!

I felt ashamed of talking so much about myself at last. I was not afraid of taxing her patience; but I wanted to hear about herself. Her letters had said so little; the closely-written pages had been about my affairs. I hinted this, and her expression changed.

'Are you sure you have finished all you want to tell me, Olga?'

'Yes—everything. At least, I have talked enough about myself for the present.'

'The poor little self is so overburdened, you see. Ah, well, we shall have plenty of time for talk! I want you to be with me as much as possible'—she hesitated, gave a nervous little laugh, and then said: 'I really do not know how to begin. I wish you would help me.' And as I looked at her, astonished at this strange commencement, she laughed again, and asked me

softly if I could not guess what she had to tell me about herself.

Then, in a moment, without another word, it flashed across me what she was going to say ; and I sat up, and gasped out :

‘Mr. Fleming !—you are going to marry Mr. Fleming !’

‘You wise child !’ and here such a pretty blush came to her face ; she looked almost like a girl that minute. ‘Yes, Olga, I have promised to marry Robert Fleming !’

‘But how—how did it happen ?’ I asked eagerly. ‘I thought you told me that he would never ask you !’

‘What ! am I to confess all that ? It will take a long time, and you have not even congratulated me. Are you shocked or sorry, Olga ? Do you think I am an old goose to change my state so late in life ? But if I had been sixty when he asked me, I would still have snapped my fingers at the world, and said yes !’

‘How can I be sorry, except for myself ?’ I returned, laying my cheek against her hand ; and, as I did so, I noticed a thick gold ring—like a guard—upon her finger. ‘Do you think I can begrudge you any happiness after the life you have led here ?’ and then, for the moment, I could say no more, for the thought of the Hall without her loved presence made my heart sink like lead ; but she must not know it—no selfishness on my part should mar her pure happiness. ‘You have been so faithful,’ I whispered, after a brief silence, during which she sat stroking my hair, with a soft, far-away look in her eyes.

‘He has been faithful too,’ was her answer. ‘Do you know, Olga, you were right : he never meant to ask me ; he told me so. I was wrong in thinking his living would make a difference ; he did not even then consider me within his reach. He was very foolish, very diffident. Oh, I have lectured him well, and made him ashamed of all his ridiculous scruples ; but, all the same, it is perfectly true that, but for the merest accident—a little drop of the curtain quite involuntary on my part—we should not have been engaged.’

‘Aunt Catherine, you must tell me more. I cannot be content with anything so vague.’

‘My dear, it is not easy to tell. I hardly know myself how it came about ; but I have a strong suspicion that Basil guessed our secret, but he would never own it ; and Mr. Fleming assures me that not a word has ever passed between them on the subject, but I am not sure. Basil is very sharp, and Mr. Fleming may have betrayed himself. However, I need not trouble you about that.’

‘Please tell me everything you can.’

'You know he spent some days with us at Hastings. Basil asked him. I was glad enough to see him; but I had given up all hopes that we should ever renew our broken engagement. I had seen him since he had become Vicar of St. Mark's, and his manner certainly gave me no idea that he considered himself anything but a friend of the family. He was always kind and considerate, always watchful for my comfort, always pleased to be with me and talk to me; but that was all. We spent two days very comfortably. I was becoming resigned to this state of things. I thought perhaps, after all, it would be better just for us to continue as friends, and friends only, until the end of the chapter. What he thought right would be right in my eyes. Only now and then a twinge crossed me. If he should be ill, and I should have no right to nurse him—even to see him—how would it be with me then?'

'You would have been miserable,' I whispered.

She pressed my hand, and went on:

'On the second evening we were sitting round the fire after dinner. Mr. Fleming had been telling about a curious love affair in his parish; it was more amusing than sentimental, and made us all laugh. When he had finished, Basil must needs cap it with another; but his was quite different. In its main points it resembled our story. Basil knew all the circumstances. The hero was a college don. He had loved a girl in his youth, and then they had been parted; and after thirty years they met, and were actually married.

"They had both been faithful to each other all those years," went on Basil, "but neither of them knew it; and when they met——"

'And at that point I raised my eyes. Mr. Fleming was looking at me with a strange, eager, questioning look. Did I answer it, I wonder? I saw a flash of intelligence, of joy, and then I looked no more; and Basil finished his story.'

She was silent; but I begged her, in a whisper, to go on.

'Virginia praised the story and the lovers' constancy; but Mr. Fleming said nothing, neither did I. Basil did not appear to notice our want of loquacity. He talked on for a little, and then he asked Virginia if she were ready for bed. He always took her up to her room, and on this occasion he did not come back for at least an hour. When he strolled in later he said the moonlight had tempted him to smoke his cigar on the Parade.'

'And you and Mr. Fleming were left alone?' for she had paused here.

'Yes'—a slow, comprehensive 'yes.' 'But there is very

little to tell, Olga ; it all came naturally. He only said, "Is it true—is it really so, Catherine?" just as though he were taking up the thread of some conversation. "Have you felt this for me?" was really his meaning, and I understood him at once. "All my life—all my life!" that was my answer ; and there was no hesitation after that.'

'Few men would have been so faithful.'

'No, indeed, not one in a thousand ; but when I told him so, he said simply that the thought of asking any other woman to marry him had never entered his head ; that he had never forgotten me, though he had always believed our union impossible. He confessed that his life had been very lonely, and only his affection for Basil had reconciled him to his solitary, hard-working existence ; and then he asked me regretfully how I could leave my beloved old Hall to keep him company in his Vicarage.

"How will you endure Leeds," he continued, "after living all these years in the country?"'

'I wonder how you answered him?'

'I should think you knew my answer beforehand,' she said, with another soft blush. 'I soon made him understand that even hardships shared with him would be preferable to my present luxurious life.'

"We have lost too many years already," I said to him. "Our youth is gone. We are middle-aged people. Do not let us spoil the remainder by raising imaginary obstacles. I am still a rich woman, though I have the Hall no longer ; and if I come to the Vicarage, you will soon see that I shall not miss any of my old comforts."

'I was very bold, Olga, and talked in this matter-of-fact fashion just to remove the last scruple, for I knew how he would torment himself about all these trifles.'

'And you are not afraid of the change?' for it seemed to me a very solemn and serious undertaking for any woman of Aunt Catherine's age to leave her own people and take up such a different life, for Miss Sefton was like a queen in Brookfield.

'I am afraid of nothing,' was her answer, 'except that the years are so few that we shall spend together ; and, Olga, I am no longer wanted here. Virginia is well and happy. She has a son to cherish her declining years ; and as for Basil, after a time he will marry again, and his wife will be the mistress of the Hall. I neglect no duty in marrying Mr. Fleming, and in one sense I have been engaged to him all my life.'

'Yes ; I understand what you mean. Aunt Catherine, you

must not think that because I am young I am not able to enter into your feelings. I understand it all—everything.'

'Do you?' she returned gently, and she looked at me rather strangely, as though she were reading me through and through. 'By and by you will understand, Olga; but not now—surely not now, for you have had no experience.'

I hardly knew what she meant by this speech, which she spoke very gravely; but it somehow made me uncomfortable. Could not one understand such things by intuition? It seemed to me that if I ever loved, my love would be like Aunt Catherine's—through life until death; no weak diluted mixture such as some women call love would ever satisfy me.

I asked her a little tremulously how soon she thought they would be married, and she answered that they had already fixed the beginning of September. Mr. Fleming's curate would be in priest's orders by then, and he would be able to take three weeks' holiday. September—then I should only have Aunt Catherine for four months! She read this thought in my eyes, and answered it at once:

'We will be together as much as possible. Olga, you must come and stay with me. I do not mean to give up my child; and I shall be often at the Hall on short visits. You shall not miss me too much, any of you. Oh, there is the gong for luncheon! and we have talked for three whole hours!'

CHAPTER XLIV

THE NEW VICAR

'Self-reverent each, and reverencing each,
Distinct in individualities,
But like each other, ev'n as those who love.'

TENNYSON.

'Uphold me, Father, in my loneliness
A little longer ! Aid me, give me strength !'

Enoch Arden.

WHEN I told Jem the news, he was perfectly dumfounded, and he owned nothing had ever surprised him so much ; but when I had made him understand what a long affair it had been, and how those two had been faithful to each other for eight-and-twenty years, he threw up his cap in the air, and said, 'Bravo, Aunt Catherine ! I call that plucky !' and he was so excited that he must needs go with me that instant to tell Hubert. And when Aunt Catherine came to Fircroft the next day, Jem congratulated her in the nicest way. He told me afterwards that he wanted to kiss her ; and he was not the least bit brusque in his manners—indeed, I never saw Jem more to advantage.

Mr. Fleming came to the Hall about ten days later, and Jem and I were invited to dinner to meet him. I never saw such a change in any man ; in spite of his gray hair he looked ten years younger—he was so bright, so alert, his keen, intelligent face was so full of animation.

And as for Aunt Catherine, both Jem and I agreed afterwards that she looked absolutely pretty. I was a little curious to see how middle-aged people conducted themselves under such circumstances ; but they were both so natural that, but for one or two little things on Mr. Fleming's part, I should never have taken them for lovers.

But I noticed that, whenever Aunt Catherine spoke, Mr.

Fleming suspended his own conversation to listen, as though he feared to lose a single word ; and once, when she was speaking to Jem, I saw his eyes resting on her with such quiet satisfaction. I know he called her Catherine ; but I never once heard her address him by any name—she told me afterwards that she kept Robert for private use ; that in public he was Mr. Fleming.

‘I like him to say Catherine,’ she remarked ; ‘but, with all my boldness, I am too shy for anything but Mr. Fleming.’

Mr. Fleming took a great deal of notice of me ; indeed, he was so marked in his attention that I knew I stood high in his favour as Aunt Catherine’s *protégée*.

‘You and I must be good friends,’ he said once, ‘for we have one strong point of sympathy between us ;’ and he talked to me a great deal about Hubert’s trouble and my new work.

Just at the last, I had a short conversation with Mr. Basil. I had sat by him at dinner, but he had been unusually quiet, and once or twice I wondered why he was so grave. He had talked more to Jem than any one. But as he brought me my cup of tea, and stood by me as I drank it, he commenced grumbling at Mr. Fleming having monopolised me all the evening :

‘There was no getting a word in,’ he observed.

I plucked up a little spirit at this.

‘You had plenty of opportunity at dinner,’ I remarked with dignity ; ‘but I do not remember that you took advantage of it.’

This was a thrust he had not expected ; he answered it quite seriously :

‘I hope I was not rude—I was in one of my taciturn moods ; but with a table like ours’—the table at the Hall was circular—‘every word one speaks is overheard ; one’s conversation is obliged to be general.’

‘So much the better !’

‘Yes, on ordinary occasions ; but I wanted to talk to you very much. I have never heard your opinion about this affair,’ with a suggestive look at the opposite couch.

Aunt Catherine was just then speaking to Mr. Fleming. It was the first time he had approached her ; how bright they both looked !

‘There can be only one opinion,’ I returned hastily : ‘that it is the nicest thing that could possibly have happened !’

‘You think so ; and yet you do not know him.’

‘Indeed I do ! I have been looking at him through Aunt Catherine’s spectacles. If any one could be good enough for her, it would be Mr. Fleming !’

'Thank you,' he said, in a low voice, and he looked very pleased.

'You agree with me, I know!'

'To be sure I do. I do not think there is a man living to compare with Mr. Fleming, and I have known him close upon four-and-twenty years—ever since I was a little chap like Reggie—and all those years I never heard an unkind word from his lips, or saw him do a mean action. As far as our imperfect human nature will allow, I think he is as near perfection as possible!'

'I can say the same of Aunt Catherine.'

'You must pardon me if I seem to disagree with you. I love Aunt Catherine dearly; but she is far more faulty as a woman than he is as a man. In spite of her virtues, I have known her hasty in her judgments, generous almost to imprudence, and, with plenty of feminine failings, these make her all the more lovable, so you need not look so indignant.'

'I do not like to think that you place Mr. Fleming on a higher pedestal.'

'Why not?' quite earnestly; 'Aunt Catherine would be the first to place him there herself; she would delight in his superiority. I thought your true woman always idealises the man she loves.'

'We were not talking of Aunt Catherine's opinion, but of yours'—in a tone of pique. 'Of course she thinks him far better than herself.'

'And you are ready to quarrel with me because I idealise him too. Try and put yourself in my place, Miss Leigh. Think of the lonely little chap I was, and how good he was to me! When I remember that man—his unfailing cheerfulness, his quiet consistency, his unwearied labours among his people, the mild dignity which he opposed to ingratitude, the tenderness he showed to sinners—I am lost in amazement at the thought of his perfections!'

And as he talked like this, I forgot my girlish pique at his restricted praise of Aunt Catherine.

'Well,' he said presently, 'are you mollified? have you forgiven me yet? I think I can say something that will please you. I am going to transpose your sentence: if any woman ever deserved him it is Aunt Catherine—will that content you?'

'That sounds better, certainly; but, Mr. Basil, I want to ask you a question: did you guess how it was when you told that story?'

He looked a little queer; but I could not bring him to the point. He became all of a sudden rather dense—wanted to know

what story I meant; and when I told him it was about a college don, professed to have forgotten it, and then began teasing me by asking 'what little bird had been telling me'; and so I was obliged to give it up.

He had a return of gravity after this, and told me very nicely that he was quite relieved to see how I was taking it; that he had feared my own sense of loss would hinder all pleasure.

'But I might have known you better,' he finished; 'I might have been sure that you would not have thought of yourself, and yet I know what it will cost you to part with your dear Aunt Catherine!'

And here he looked at me very kindly, just as though he understood all about it, and was sorry for me. I could find no answer, and then Jem came up and fetched me away; but I was glad afterwards that I had had that little talk with him. I liked, after all, to think that Mr. Fleming stood so high in his estimation; and, of course, Aunt Catherine was not faultless!

Aunt Catherine kept her promise of seeing me as much as possible, but my visits to the Hall were much restricted now. I could not often spend an evening there; an hour or two in the afternoon was all that could be spared. Aunt Catherine soon found out this for herself, but she was not long in discovering a remedy.

One day Hubert surprised me very much by asking me what Kitty had said about Miss Boyle. I was so much taken aback at the question that I did not answer for a moment; and then he told me that Miss Sefton had been speaking to him—that she thought the children's lessons added to all my other duties were a little too much for my strength—that I was growing thin, and always looked tired now; and then she had mentioned Miss Boyle in very high terms.

'Is it true that dear Kitty wished you to speak to me on the subject, Olga?'

'Yes, quite true; but Kitty said I was to speak in a few months' time; there was no hurry. I wish Aunt Catherine had not talked to you, Hubert. I do so love teaching Mab and Jessie, and they are so good, too; and I do not care if I am tired, so that I can be a comfort to you;' for I had just then such an unaccountable feeling—a longing for work. I could not bear to be unoccupied a moment. Perhaps I should have liked a little leisure now and then if I could spend it with Aunt Catherine; but in three short months she would be gone, and I should value my leisure no more.

'My dear, you are a comfort to me,' he said, with a sigh.

'What should I do without you and Jem? But you are like one of my own children. I must take care of you as I would of Mab and Jessie. I cannot have you grow thin in my service. Kitty wore herself out. I will not have my sister follow my wife's example.'

'But I am so strong,' I pleaded. And, indeed, I never ailed anything; so what did it matter if I grew a little thin?

'Kitty was strong too, once.' He checked himself, and then begged me more quietly to repeat every word she had said on the subject. 'She was quite right,' he returned when I had finished. 'My darling was always so wise. Mab is clever, and ought to have good teaching; I will see Miss Boyle myself.'

Hubert was almost cheerful for the remainder of the day. I believe the idea that he was carrying out Kitty's arrangement for her children gave him exquisite pleasure. I knew it was no use saying a word to dissuade him; I had lost my dear little pupils from that day. When Hubert came home that afternoon, he called me into the study and gave me an account of his visit to Fir Cottage with a good deal of animation.

'Miss Boyle is a most sensible person. She is not young—about six or seven and thirty, I should say—and she is quite a gentlewoman. Her manners prepossessed me from the first. She appears very amiable and pleasant. She spoke quite frankly of their circumstances; her sister's trying state of health—she has some internal disease—had obliged her to throw up a most lucrative situation. She did not disguise their poverty—said they were newcomers, but that in time, with her good references, she hoped to secure a morning or daily engagement; a morning engagement would suit her best, as she should not leave her sister so many hours alone.'

'Did you see the sister?'

'Yes; poor Rosina, as she called her. She is a very plain woman, but has a sensible face, like Miss Boyle. They were both so pleased when I spoke of my own children. Miss Boyle agreed at once to come from half-past nine until half-past twelve; the hours will be quite long enough for the little girls; and she begged that she might not stay to luncheon. If you like, Olga, you can still teach Willie for another year.'

'Oh, may I? Thank you, Hubert;' for I felt as though my mornings would be blank without the children.

Aunt Catherine was charmed when she heard Miss Boyle had really been engaged, but I would not share her satisfaction. I grumbled so much that she laughingly told Mr. Basil when he came in from his ride that I was in a cantankerous mood because

I had been deprived of my two pupils, 'and she does not thank me a bit for my interference; she has as much as told me so.'

'It is always a trial to relinquish work,' he said, with evident sympathy, and not joining in Aunt Catherine's fun; 'if it were not asking too great a favour, Miss Leigh, I would beg you to let Reggie share Wilfred's lessons; he is such a big boy, and he does not know his letters properly.'

I hardly know what I said in return, except that it would be a great pleasure—a very great pleasure—to teach Reggie.

'All right; he shall come, then, and spell his *a b*, *ab*, if you are sure you will not consider it a bore,' he returned in quite an off-hand manner; but he did not say any more just then. Of course he saw that I had understood his motive; nothing would console me more for the loss of my pupils than the prospect of teaching Reggie. I longed to thank Mr. Basil for his thoughtfulness, but I could only stammer out again that it would be such a pleasure.

My daily labours were considerably lightened now. The hour spent with Willie and Reggie in the nursery was simply a play-hour to us all. Every morning at ten Reggie came flying down the garden, with his spelling-book tucked under his arm, and a sort of business-like gravity on his face. I wished his father could have seen him, toiling over the pot-hooks in the copy-book, or puzzling over the tremendous sentence 'The cat has a rat,' with his eyebrows raised and his dear little mouth puckered up. He never liked me to kiss him at such moments. 'Tell me about the cat, my Dear, and don't be silly,' he would say, quite crossly.

Sometimes I took Reggie and Willie back to the Hall, and sat with Aunt Catherine while they played under Marsden's care; but generally I went to her in the afternoon, or she would come across to me about tea-time. I never missed a day if I could help it.

Jem had another tutorship for the long vacation, and only rushed home for a couple of days. He seemed more satisfied with my appearance, and told me encouragingly that I was all right now.

'Hubert told me last night what a clever little housekeeper you were,' he said, as we walked round the garden after dinner; 'he says everything goes on like clockwork, and that Miss Boyle is a treasure. I wonder what Hubert means to do about pupils; there is Harry leaving at Christmas, and he has not inquired about any new ones.'

'He is not up to the work just now,' I replied. 'I do wish we need not have any more pupils, Jem; they give so much trouble in the house, and it is so awkward for me. Harry does not

matter, of course ; he is one of us ; but if any other young man comes, Hubert will be obliged to spend his evenings in the drawing-room.'

I need not have disquieted myself on the subject, for a few days after our talk Hubert had a letter from Biarritz. The poor old Vicar of Brookfield, who had been dragging on a suffering existence for the last three years, had succumbed at last to his malady, and the tidings of his death reached us. Hubert told me the news very gravely, but he made no further comment on it, neither did Aunt Catherine when I went across that morning.

'Mr. Bevan has been an absentee so long that people will not miss him,' was all she said ; 'he was a good old man, but somewhat deficient in energy. I think the people like Mr. Leigh better.'

It seemed good taste not to pursue the subject. I was quite aware that the living was in the Squire's gift ; indeed, in old times a Sefton had always held it. The Vicarage was a large house, but was sadly in need of repairs. The Bevans, who had no children, had simply used a few rooms and shut up the remainder ; in fact, Hubert once told me the dilapidations would be immense, and it would take hundreds of pounds to make it habitable for a large family. He and Kitty had taken a dislike to it ; they had never thought it healthy, and the garden was thickly wooded and very damp. Hubert once declared in my hearing that nothing would induce him to leave Fircroft. I think we all felt a little unsettled for the next two days, and then Hubert called me into his study, and told me a little sadly that the Squire had offered him the living, and he had accepted it.

'And you are really the Vicar of Brookfield ?' I asked a little breathlessly, but somehow I did not dare to congratulate him.

'Yes, dear. Kitty was always wishing this to happen, but we thought the poor old Vicar would last for years. Lyndhurst has been most generous ; he wanted to take most of the repairs of the Vicarage on his own shoulders. He declared the dilapidations would almost ruin the widow, but he soon saw there was no necessity. I told him, Olga, that nothing would induce me to quit Fircroft, where every room is sacred to me, and then he suggested that I should live here rent free.'

'I always forget Mr. Basil is our landlord.'

'Of course I declined this generous proposition. The living is a good one, and with the little I have of my own I shall have sufficient without taking pupils. One thing pleases me much : Montague will remain as my curate. There is to be a mission church at Braidley, and, as it will be three miles off, I could not undertake both churches.'

'A mission church at Braidley! how delighted Aunt Catherine will be! This has been her wish for years.'

'It seems to be the Squire's wish too. He tells me that his mother's fortune has accumulated all these years, that she has been hoarding her money for him, and that he is almost alarmed to find how rich he is, and so he has persuaded her that this church at Braidley must be built, and she has fallen in with his views. I tell you this in confidence, Olga—I think Lyndhurst means it as a thank-offering.'

'Is Mr. Montague to be the incumbent?'

'I do not know; I am not sure. I think at first we shall work it together; but there will be plenty of time to make up our minds.'

'May I speak to Aunt Catherine about it?'

'Perhaps you had better wait until she talks to you;' and then I did bring myself to say a word of congratulation to Hubert.

'Of course I am glad about it,' he said quietly, but there was no gladness in his face. 'It is a relief to know that I shall spend my life at Brookfield; I am attached to the people, and I love Fircroft, and my Kitty's grave is here; and by and by, when the children can shift for themselves, I shall perhaps say my *Nunc Dimittis*. God grant it!' he added very sadly.

Poor Hubert! the wound was not yet beginning to heal. We Leighs were a faithful race, singularly tenacious in our attachments. It would be years before Hubert would reconcile himself to the loss of his Kitty, before he would own that life held any attractions for him.

Aunt Catherine spoke of the new Vicar the moment she saw me.

'I am so glad it is all settled,' she said, as we sat in the old English garden that afternoon. 'Basil did not take long to make up his mind; the moment he read Mrs. Bevan's note he exclaimed, "Now Mr. Leigh can have the living."'

'I am so pleased you did not mention it to him first.'

'Oh no! it was quite his own idea. He has the highest opinion of your brother; he says he is so humble-minded and so sincere; and then he admires him for the way he bears his trouble. I think he has a good opinion of all the Leighs.'

'I am glad of that.'

'Has Mr. Leigh told you about Basil's plan—I mean the church for Braidley?' and as I nodded, she continued eagerly, 'That was not quite his own idea; it grew out of a conversation he and Mr. Fleming and I had together at Hastings. Basil was grumbling half in fun about his money. "I cannot use half," he

said, "and one pony is enough for Reggie. Ladybird and a couple of hunters for my own use are about as much as I want;" and then he added more seriously, "I do not like the idea of spending it all on myself, and if I only knew some object! "Why not build a church for Braidley?" I exclaimed, and Mr. Fleming caught up the notion at once, and so did Basil. I had to tell them all about the place, and how the people had to walk three miles to church, and there is only a Dissenting chapel in the place. I finished, "And all the poorer people attend that." Well, we sat up until midnight discussing it, and when I bade them good-night Basil followed me into the passage.

"It is a good thought of yours, Aunt Catherine," he said very earnestly; "a church for these poor people will be just the thing. It will be a thank-offering from my mother and myself."

"And from me, too," I implored; for the preceding evening Mr. Fleming had spoken to me, and I wanted to be ready with my *Te Deum* too. "You must let me give a thousand pounds, Basil." And after a little he consented.

'And it is to be begun at once?'

'Oh yes; Basil has seen the architect, and the site is all ready. Basil is not one to let the grass grow under his feet—he is a regular Sefton in that. I never saw such energy; he works splendidly. I have nothing to do now, and he is just as indefatigable in his amusements—riding, shooting, tennis. He puts his heart into everything.'

'And yet he never seems tired.'

'Tired! The word is not in his vocabulary. He certainly has a magnificent physique. Only mental worry tires Basil. He and Reggie are often out riding before breakfast. After breakfast he writes his letters, looks at the paper, talks to his mother, and then, perhaps, goes riding again. In the afternoon, if any one challenges him, he is quite ready for a game of tennis or a drive in his dog-cart; or he will run over to Brighton, and have a dip in the sea. Sometimes he is a little sleepy after dinner, but he never gives in to it; and after a cup of coffee and a chat with us, he goes off to the library to read. I tell him his days are three times as long as other people's.'

'I never saw him look so well. But he is always grave now.'

'I know what you mean; but that will wear off by degrees. At times he is still a little depressed—when he goes to see Mr. Barton, for example.'

'Oh! by the bye, how is that poor man?'

'Better—certainly better. He talks a great deal about Aline still, but Basil thinks he is more cheerful; he takes an interest in

his business, and in the evening he always has a friend to smoke with him. Basil means to take Reggie one day to see him. He thinks Mr. Barton has a hankering after the boy.'

'And he will not come to the Hall?'

'No, he has positively declined every invitation. But Becky tells Basil that he is never tired of talking about Allie's fine home. He has got her velvet mantle locked up in a drawer, and sometimes he takes Becky to see it. "She looked like a queen in it, didn't she, Becky?" he would say. "Wasn't it grand to see her—and the diamonds flashing on her fingers? And to think it was my girl Allie!"'

I met Mr. Basil in the avenue that afternoon; he was in his tennis flannels, and was carrying his racket. He looked flushed and heated with the game, for it was a July afternoon, but he would insist on walking with me to the gate at Fircroft. On the way he asked me what Aunt Catherine and I had been talking about, and without a moment's hesitation I blurted out, 'Braidley Church,' for that had appeared to me the important item in the conversation.

He seemed a little taken aback at this answer.

'I hope you approved?' he said, in a low voice, twisting his racket rather nervously.

'I think it a lovely idea,' I returned warmly.

He turned such a bright face on me as I made this eloquent remark.

'I was sure you would like it, but I could not bring myself to ask you; it seemed so conceited to mention it, don't you know. But all the same, I was dying to know what you thought of our plan.'

'You could not have doubted my opinion for a moment. Not that I have any right to give it.'

'No one has more right,' he returned impetuously. 'There is no one whose opinion I should value so highly.' And then he added more quietly, and with a sort of effort: 'I always regard you as a special friend, Miss Leigh.'

'Oh yes, thank you.' And then I said hurriedly: 'The church will be a great blessing to Braidley.'

'I hope so; it seems terribly needed.' And, half laughing: 'It will be a blessing to me, too, for it will give me plenty of work. Ladybird and I are likely to be tired of the Braidley road.'

'You ought to be tired now, playing tennis this hot afternoon.'

'Well, Montague cried off at last, and so did Vivian; they declared they could not play any longer. What a nice fellow Montague is! Is he not? Harry and Jem are always singing his

praises. He is a lucky beggar too ; he talks about getting married next summer. Jem says he is engaged to an uncommonly pretty girl, and she is nice into the bargain. Don't you think he is to be envied, Miss Leigh ?'

'I—I don't know. I suppose so, if she is really nice,' for Mr. Basil's manner rather confused me—it was half mischievous, half serious. I told him I was in a great hurry, but he did not seem to believe me, and he talked about Mr. Montague and his pretty Barbara all the way to Fircroft.

'I think he is a fellow to be envied,' he repeated.

'But he is poor—they will both be poor,' I said rather stupidly.

'Under some circumstances poverty is an evil that can be lightly borne. With youth, strength, and mutual love, they will not need your pity.' And then he gave me a droll look. 'I don't believe you would be more prudent than Barbara Campbell, under the circumstances,' with a stress on the last words, 'especially if you saw any chance of making yourself uncomfortable for some one else's sake.'

Now, was not that a pretty compliment to my unselfishness on Mr. Basil's part, though he took off his hat and left me the moment he had said it, as though he feared a reproof on my part ?

CHAPTER XLV

A VIOLET IN SEPTEMBER

'Eternal blessings crown my earliest friend,
And round his dwelling guardian saints attend.'
GOLDSMITH.

'My love is like the steadfast sun,
Or streams that deepen as they run ;
I think thee, wedded wife of mine,
The best of all that's not Divine.'

THOSE summer days passed all too quickly. July came, then August, with its ripe golden days and balmy nights, and then September ; and from that time I began to count the hours as jealously as a miser. Aunt Catherine made all her arrangements very quietly. To my disappointment, the wedding was not to be at Brookfield ; but when she told me her reasons, I could not but own she was right. She and Mr. Fleming wished the ceremony to be as quiet as possible. Aunt Catherine's position in the county, her great popularity in the village, would have brought crowds of her richer and poorer neighbours to Brookfield Church ; the school children would have strewn flowers, and the churchyard would have been lined with friendly faces.

'We cannot face it, Olga,' she said decidedly. 'We are not young people, and we must be married in our own way ;' and then she told me her plans.

Mrs. Lyndhurst would not be at the wedding under any circumstances ; but on the morning before the eventful day, Aunt Catherine and I and Marsden were to go to a quiet family hotel near Berkeley Square. The rooms were already taken. Mr. Basil would join us early the next morning ; and Jem, whose tutorship was just over, had permission to meet us at the church. There would be no one else except the lawyer who was to give Aunt

Catherine away, and she and Mr. Fleming intended to drive straight from the church to the station *en route* for the English Lakes. They were to be married at a church near Baker Street by an old college friend of Mr. Fleming's. Who would have thought one of the ladies of Brookfield Hall would have married so quietly, nay humbly?

It did me good to see Aunt Catherine's gentle composure during those last few days. There was much to do, many to whom she had to say good-bye; but she fulfilled every duty without haste or flurry, overlooking no one, but giving to each one their due. She said very little about herself and the future. I think her happiness lay too deep for speech; but there was a serenity—a quiet content—in her looks that spoke volumes. She seemed hardly to regret bidding good-bye to her beautiful home.

'I shall be often here—we shall be often here,' she corrected herself; 'and it is Basil's house, not mine.' And once she said a word that gave a clue to everything: 'There is nothing to regret; everything is as it should be. I have no room for anything but thankfulness. My one thought is to make up to him for all the years of happiness he has lost.'

We had one last long talk the evening before she left the Hall. I had been there most of the day helping Marsden. Aunt Catherine had left us pretty much to ourselves. She had been sitting with Mrs. Lyndhurst and walking with Mr. Basil; but after dinner, instead of joining the others in the drawing-room, she called me into her dressing-room.

'Virginia has talked enough,' she said quietly, 'and Basil and I have said all we want to say to each other; and now it is your turn, Olga, for to-morrow I shall only be thinking of myself, and shall not have a thought to spare for any one;' and then she began giving me advice in her wise, kindly way, mentioning all my little difficulties one by one, and giving me her ideas how each one should be met. 'You must promise me one thing,' she went on, when she had drawn from me another confession or two: 'promise me that I shall not be less to you at Leeds than I am at the Hall. Your weekly letter must tell me everything about yourself. I must still share your life as much as I have always done.'

Was it not sweet of her to say this?

'And you must not let Virginia miss me too much. Of course I do not expect you to pay her a daily visit with all your home duties. That would be asking too much; but, indeed, I need not speak about this, for I know you will not neglect her, and we have already decided that for the present your brother must be your first duty.'

'Not only for the present,' I murmured; but she took no notice of this little speech.

'I am glad you will have Reggie every day. It will make you happier, will it not? My dear, what I am going to say will sound a little unfeeling, for I know you are sad to-night with the prospect of losing me, and I ought in my sympathy to be sad, too; but I cannot be—I am far too happy about you.'

What a strange speech! and my heart was so full, too. I could hardly keep the tears back.

'Am I bewildering you? What a reproachful look, Olga! Oh, I cannot explain myself—at least, not fully; but at least I can say this, that I am leaving you in the safe path of duty.'

'Oh, if you mean that!' in a relieved tone, for of course she was speaking of Hubert.

'My dear, the last time I gave my village Bible-class, we were reading that striking passage about the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. I know no lesson so suggestive, so pregnant with meaning to all of us. Do you remember the situation—how they were shut in—entangled—enemies behind and raging waves before; and the message came "Stand still!"?'

'Well?' for she had paused here, with a sort of solemnity in her manner.

'"Stand still!" Could anything be safer? Wait—watch—until the path opens; it is now closed; and then, as the waves rolled back, "Go forward!"'

'Oh, I see.'

'Are you sure that you see?—are you sure you take in all the meaning? You are "standing still" now, just doing your work from day to day. Never mind how you like it, how long it is to last. Never mind if you see no hope or vestige of a change. How can you until the way opens—until you hear the "Go forward" spoken and approved by your own conscience? Darling, do you think you understand now?'

'Yes, yes;' but I said it with tears. I felt a choking sensation that this was not the life I wanted.

'And so,' drawing me closer to her, 'I do not fear to leave you. I love you too well to rob you of the sweet privilege of sharing your brother's burdens. Your after-life will be all the brighter for the knowledge that you have done your duty. But now we have talked enough, and Basil will be wondering what has become of me. I am going to send you home now; but you will come very early in the morning.'

I promised this without difficulty, for I knew Hubert would be too willing to spare me. I was glad to escape without

encountering Mr. Basil again, for I was ashamed that he should see the marks of tears on my face. It seemed so selfish to fret when Aunt Catherine was so happy.

As I walked down the avenue I thought how strange it was that she had never once mentioned Mr. Basil, or expressed any sorrow in leaving him or Reggie. Love must be a wonderful thing, I thought, if it made people forget their nearest and dearest ; and then I checked this thought, as though it wronged her. She had her reasons. Perhaps she was feeling it all the time, although she forbore to speak of it. She certainly loved them both dearly. Mr. Basil had been away a great deal this summer. I had once expressed my surprise to Aunt Catherine that he should care to leave her ; but she had replied rather more curtly than usual that it was by her wish that he had done so ; that the change was good for him.

So there had been grouse-shooting and salmon-fishing and even deer-stalking in Scotland for nearly five weeks, and Mr. Basil only returned to the Hall three or four days before the wedding ; indeed, I had not seen him before that evening. He seemed in excellent spirits, said he had had splendid weather and plenty of sport, and was now going to settle down for the winter. He did not look quite pleased as I gave an incredulous smile at this piece of information.

'I believe you think I like rushing about better than staying at home,' he said, in rather a piqued voice. 'You are wrong if you think so. I never want to stir from the Hall. I am happier here than anywhere ;' and though I found this difficult to believe, I dared not say another word, for he seemed rather touchy on the subject, and Aunt Catherine interposed somewhat hastily with a question as to whether he had found her a piece of white heather.

Mr. Basil had been a little silent all the rest of dinner-time, and I wondered more than once why my incredulity about his settling down had given him offence. I know I tried hard to draw him into conversation by all sorts of little appeals ; but he answered me each time so gravely that I was obliged to leave him alone, and after that Aunt Catherine had called me to her dressing-room.

But he seemed to have forgotten all about it when I went up to the Hall the next morning. The servants were bringing down the luggage, and he told me that Aunt Catherine was with his mother.

'My mother is a little low this morning,' he said ; 'that is why I am going to stop with her instead of giving you and Aunt Catherine the pleasure of my company up to town ;' and here he

waited for me to contradict him, but I had not the spirit of a mouse this morning, and he might have said what he liked unchallenged. I suppose he saw this, for he went on sedately: 'I grumbled at first when Aunt Catherine made the arrangement. I thought she wanted to get rid of me, but now I see she is right; my mother will require cheering up. I am going to take her for a drive presently, and we will get some lunch at that pretty old inn out by Yatton; and I will show her the village and the churchyard, and when the horses have had a rest, we will drive back to dinner.'

'Will Reggie go too?'

'Oh yes; Reggie will go too;' and then he did look a little mischievous, as though he longed to say something; but just then Aunt Catherine came in, looking somewhat agitated: the parting with her sister after all these years had doubtless tried her.

Mrs. Lyndhurst would not have spared her feelings; and even Aunt Catherine's gentle serenity had given way for a moment. It was then that Mr. Basil came to her aid; he asked her in a low voice if she were ready, and as she seemed hardly able to answer him, he said cheerfully that it was no use losing the train, and he wanted the carriage to take his mother to Yatton, and would she please put on her gloves? But before they were buttoned he had drawn her hand through his arm.

'There is no time to be lost,' he observed; 'you must just shake hands with Mrs. Larkins and Bennett;' but he hurried her off before poor Mrs. Larkins could say a word.

I saw Aunt Catherine look back at the Hall through her tears, and then she pressed Mr. Basil's hand. I could not hear what she said to him, but he coloured and looked down, and there was a moved expression on his face. I looked away at once, and tried not to listen. Presently Aunt Catherine addressed me; she wanted me to remind her of something when we got to Victoria. She had regained her composure. As we stood together on the platform she gave some messages to Mr. Basil.

'Tell Mrs. Larkins that I was too much upset to speak to her just then,' she said. 'There was no hurry, after all. We have time to wait, you see.'

'The Hall clock must be fast,' returned Mr. Basil gravely. He had the audacity to add, 'After all, it is a good fault; but I may as well tell Bennett to regulate it. Ah, there comes the train! Miss Leigh, I shall put Aunt Catherine in your charge now;' and he bade her an affectionate adieu.

The rest of the day passed very quietly. We had a late luncheon. In the afternoon Mr. Fleming was expected, and I

went up to Marsden. But in a little while Aunt Catherine came in search of me. She said they were going to evensong at All Saints', Margaret's Street, and she wished me to come too.

What a quiet, tranquil hour that was! how infinitely more soothing than the ordinary bustle before a wedding! It made one feel better to be near those two, who, after their sorely-tried lives, had attained their hearts' desire. Ah, well! youth is good, and long waiting is sad; but were they any less happy that all those years they had done their duty? The evening sunshine was streaming down on the knot of worshippers, and as it lighted up Aunt Catherine's sweet face, and I noticed Mr. Fleming's calm, reverent manner as he made the responses, I knew no hearts were more glad than theirs—that a richer aftermath in this world's gleanings had never been known.

They parted very quietly after this. Mr. Fleming was to dine and sleep at the house of his friend, the Vicar of St. Jude's. He just walked with us to the door of our hotel and left us there.

Aunt Catherine remained in her own room until dinner-time. There was very little talk between us that evening. She asked me to take my book, but I noticed that hers was on her lap unopened, and when the twilight closed in her abstraction was so great that she did not notice that I could not see to read, and I was so fearful of disturbing her that I sat quite motionless. She rose at last in a little hurry and accused herself of selfishness.

'I will ring for lights,' she said apologetically. 'My dear, I fear you are having a dull evening; but you will have Jem to-morrow. Shall you mind if I go to my own room now? You have been very good, but there are times when one must be alone.'

It was certainly a little surprise to me the next morning when, on coming down to our late breakfast—Aunt Catherine had proposed a late breakfast—I found Mr. Basil standing at the window. He gave me a critical look as he shook hands.

'Is it allowable to make a remark?' he asked. 'It is such a relief not to see you in black. It is quite a rest to one's mind.'

'This is Aunt Catherine's choice,' I answered shyly; 'she has given me the dress, so I do not mind your admiring it.'

'And I do admire it very much,' he interrupted.

But I was not going to let him go on like that.

'Pray, have you flown here, Mr. Basil?'

'Well, not exactly; but I took the first train, for I meant all along to breakfast with you and Aunt Catherine. I thought you might want me to keep up your spirits;' and then he checked himself, for the waiter was bringing in the coffee, and Aunt Catherine was following him.

She did not seem at all surprised to see Mr. Basil, only a faint blush came to her cheek when she heard him tell me in a very audible whisper that he had never seen her look so nice, though the only notice she took of it was to bid us come to breakfast. I think Mr. Basil was the only one who talked much, but it struck me that he was not really in such good spirits, only he made an effort to appear so. I heard afterwards that he had dreaded the day, and that he had to keep himself well in hand to go through the service. Poor fellow! it must have been a painful ordeal to him, for he had never attended any wedding but his own. Aunt Catherine was very silent. Once or twice she started when Mr. Basil addressed her; it was evident her thoughts were far away. By and by I whispered to him not to disturb her, and then he took the hint, and talked only to me, until she rose and said that it was time to get ready for church. I went into her room presently to tell her the carriage was at the door, and that Mr. Cardew, the family lawyer, was waiting for her. She was standing by the window, ready dressed, with her little prayer-book in her hand. The dark-gray silk seemed to harmonise exactly with her quiet, tranquil face. She held out her hand to me with her old smile.

'I am ready,' she said gently; 'and I think I am not so nervous as you. What makes you look so pale, Olga? You want your old colour to match that pretty dress.'

It was only a few minutes' drive. Jem was at the church door to receive us. He looked bright and well, and gave me an approving nod as I joined him. He and Mr. Basil and I sat together. Ah, well! I have seen many weddings since, but it seems to me that I never saw one more to my taste than that wedding in that empty church; and yet the bride was elderly, and the bridegroom gray-haired and worn. But as I heard the tender solemnity of those two voices, as they exchanged vows that had been forbidden in youth, I felt no union could be more blessed and perfect than theirs. We followed them into the vestry. Aunt Catherine was signing her name, and her husband was standing beside her. She laid down her pen to greet us. Mr. Basil came first; then she held out her hands to me, and offered her cheek to Jem.

We were only a few minutes with her. Just at the last she put her hand on my arm.

'Remember our talk, Olga. Be good, be brave; above all, be happy, and God bless you!' Then she turned to Mr. Fleming, 'I am ready, Robert. I have not kept you waiting, have I? Where is Basil?'

'He has gone outside to see the last of us.'

But I heard no more: she was gone—my dear Aunt Catherine was gone. My tears were falling fast as I walked down the empty aisle beside Jem. Mr. Basil was looking for us. To my relief, he took no notice of me, and addressed Jem in a cheerful, off-hand fashion.

'There is no eradicating the remnants of superstition from an uncultured mind. Marsden is an excellent creature, but she has the faults of her class. Would you believe it, Leigh, she had secreted a satin slipper to throw after the carriage for luck! I caught her in the act—I did, indeed. I thought Mr. Cardew looked amused. She has gone back to the hotel to collect the things and settle the bill. And now what shall we do with ourselves?'

'We may as well get some luncheon first,' suggested Jem briskly.

'The very thing I was going to propose. Look here, you two are going to be my guests. There is a first-rate restaurant a stone's-throw from here, and we must have some champagne to drink the health of the happy couple.'

It was no use my uttering a feeble protest against the champagne; Mr. Basil was determined to have his way.

How I wished I could have enjoyed the little feast! he and Jem were so kind, so gay, so bent on cheering me. We had a little table to ourselves in a window overlooking the street. I was still in my wedding garb—neither of them would hear of my changing my dress. Black should not be worn that day, they said.

On our way to the restaurant Mr. Basil bought me some lovely flowers. The luncheon he ordered was most luxurious. He consulted Jem gravely about the champagne; there must be dessert—fruit, coffee; there was no end to his munificence. And afterwards he bought bonbons for Reggie and our children, until I implored him seriously to desist.

It was impossible to remain silent or depressed under such circumstances. I never could resist Jem's fun, and it pleased me to see how well he got on with Mr. Basil. After all, I was young. The sun was shining. Who could withstand the mingled influence of sunshine, kindness, and flowers? I began to listen to their stories, to talk myself, to laugh. Jem patted me on the shoulder, and said it was the champagne, but I knew better—it was the kind consideration that had shielded me, the unspoken sympathy, the generous effort to be gay. How could I refuse to smile and be happy?

I think Mr. Basil was a little disappointed when he found we were not going back with him to Brookfield; but Jem had begged me to wait for a later train: he wanted to introduce me to his friends, the Campbells. I found he had set his heart on this little plan. I should not be tired, he would treat me to a hansom. He had said something about it yesterday, when he was dining at Addison Road, and the girls had begged him to bring me over to tea.

Yes, I am sure that Mr. Basil was disappointed; but of course he would not interfere with Jem's plans. Jem was looking so eager about it, so desirous of conveying to me the exact message that had been sent, and in such visible anxiety lest any obstacle should be raised, that one could not thwart him.

It was rather irksome to me to go among strangers on such a day. I would far rather have gone back quietly to Brookfield, but I would not hint this to Jem. So after a time Mr. Basil sent for a hansom, but I thought he looked a little dull walking down Regent Street alone. I told Jem that I wished he could have come too, but he said he could not have taken such a liberty with Mrs. Campbell.

Jem talked about the family as we drove along. I found he had seen a good deal of them from time to time. I began to have my suspicions. Violet's name was never once mentioned—it was Miss Barbara or Miss Lillie.

I waited vainly to hear the eldest sister mentioned. Presently he said, 'Miss Campbell played a great deal of classical music,' but his tone was a little constrained. I began to be eager to see this Violet, for it might be that Jem—well, one never knew whether young men of his age were really in earnest.

The Campbells lived in a large old-fashioned house standing back from the main road; the big double drawing-room into which we were at once ushered seemed very full of girls—alarmingly so. There were girls in hats and without hats; girls with rackets, and other girls with teacups in their hands; but my fears for Jem's future peace of mind subsided when I found a few of them were neighbours. A stout, ladylike woman, with a very soft voice, received us; and a very pretty girl—whom she called Gipsy and Jem called Miss Barbara, and who was Mr. Montague's *fiancée*, brought me a cup of tea; and another younger and fairer one, with a comical little turned-up nose, tried to tempt me with various sorts of cake.

I sat and tried to answer Mrs. Campbell's civil inquiries. Jem had told them about the wedding, and Miss Barbara and her younger sisters plied me with questions. It was pleasant, but

rather fatiguing, and all the time a buzz of girlish voices and laughter seemed to fill the room.

Jem was in the middle of a bevy of girls; he was haranguing them, teacup in hand, and was very much at his ease. I took advantage of a lull in the conversation to ask Miss Barbara if her sister Violet were in the room.

'Oh no,' she replied; 'she is playing tennis. Vi is our best player; but the set will soon be over. I come next to Vi. Wasn't it impertinent of me to get engaged before her? Lillie comes next.' So the young lady with the *nez retroussé* was Lillie. 'Then Emily and Maud. Maud is in short frocks, you see.'

'And the rest are friends?'

'Yes, or cousins. We have cousins by the dozen;' and so she chattered on.

I was mightily pleased with this little Miss Barbara; she was so naïve and bright—in fact, they seemed a nice family. A few minutes later Jem's voice startled me out of a dream. My thoughts had flown to Aunt Catherine.

'Olga, Miss Campbell wishes to be introduced to you;' and there was a young lady, in a sailor hat, standing by Jem, with very soft, gray eyes, and an open, frank face, that I thought extremely taking; and yet it was not pretty—oh no, not in the least pretty.

'It was very good of you to come to us. I am sure you must be tired,' she said, in a clear, decided voice that was pleasant like her face. 'Weddings are trying things, especially if one is much interested in them. Your sister certainly looks tired, Mr. Leigh. The room is hot, and all those girls are so noisy; perhaps a turn in the garden would be refreshing.'

I hailed this at once, and Jem accompanied us, of course. I knew how it was as I paced up and down between those two. Violet Campbell would be just the sort of girl to suit Jem; he would not care for beauty—not actual beauty. Miss Barbara was the acknowledged belle of the Campbell family. An amiable, sprightly girl, with no nonsense in her, and plenty of character, would be more in Jem's line. I felt I should like her immensely. She was not specially clever; there was nothing original in her remarks; but she was clear-witted and kind-hearted, and could oppose Jem's sarcasm with a gentle raillery that evidently suited him exactly. I began to think that I admired her very much before we took our leave. I liked her clear complexion, glowing with health—the dimple in her cheek, the particular shade of her brown hair; and she had a pretty figure, too. We stayed as long as we could, and then Jem put me into another hansom.

'We shall only just do it,' he said. 'I wasted a good three minutes looking for my hat. I hope you are not tired, Olga; but you can rest to-morrow.'

'Jem,' I whispered, for I had got him safe, and he could not escape, 'I know why you wanted me to go; and I like them all, but I like your Violet best.'

'Hush!' he said, flushing up to his forehead, and looking more bashful than I ever saw Jem look before. 'She is not my Violet yet; I wish she were; but I mean to do everything in my power to get her. Do you think—do you think—I shall have any chance by and by?' But I need not repeat my answer, or the long talk that followed, and that lasted all the way to Brookfield.

It was quite late—nearly ten—when we walked out of the station; but my flowers were still quite fresh. As we came near Fircroft a tall figure loomed in view. It was Mr. Basil smoking his cigar under the trees; he seemed on the look-out for us.

'Are you quite done up, Miss Leigh?' he asked at once. 'I thought I would take a stroll in this direction; I knew you would be late. So you have not thrown away the flowers yet?'

'We have had a first-rate day,' returned Jem volubly. 'Olga has behaved like a brick. She has not given in, but I should think she has had just enough of it. Don't let us keep you standing out here, Olga. I shall just smoke a pipe with Lyndhurst before I turn in.'

'Very well,' I returned, obeying this hint; but Mr. Basil followed me inside the gate to ask if I were not very, very tired.

'My mother hopes to see you to-morrow,' he said; 'but I shall tell her not to expect you too early.' And then he asked me for a little piece of heliotrope, and of course I could not refuse him.

Oh, how tired I was! When Hubert saw my face, he would not let me speak a word.

'The Squire has been here, and has told me all about it,' he said. 'Go to bed, you poor child! and have a good long sleep.'

But, after all, I was not too tired to put my flowers in water, or to think of Aunt Catherine as I laid my head on the pillow; and I was not nearly so unhappy as I expected to be—every one was so kind!

CHAPTER XLVI

A NEW YEAR'S GIFT

'I love you the better since your perplexities have become known to me.'
St. Ronan's Well.

'Thou hast the secret of my heart ;
Forgive, be generous, and depart.'
Lady of the Lake.

THERE is little to record of the weeks that followed Aunt Catherine's marriage. I missed her—ah, how I missed her !—but I tried to act up to the spirit of her parting words, and there was no time to fret. Jem stayed with us until the second week in October, and while he was in the house I could not call a moment my own. He followed me upstairs and down ; he took me for long walks, and day after day I had to listen to his plans—his projects—for winning this pearl among girls—Violet Campbell. I used to envy him as he talked. I thought what a fine thing it must be to be a man—young, at the very beginning of life—and to know exactly what one wanted. Jem knew what he wanted, and he intended to have it, too ; as far as his modesty allowed, he had not a doubt on the subject ; neither had I, for how could Violet refuse him ? Of course he must work for her ; he must leave Oxford, and begin to eat his dinners before he ventured to talk of an engagement ; but he had a little money of his own, and Violet would have a little too ; and perhaps for a year or two they might manage. This was how we talked—as though a struggling, briefless barrister were one of the enchanted knights of old, and could hew his way through all obstacles. When Jem was gone, I devoted myself to Hubert, and I was often with Mrs. Lyndhurst. Now and then I saw Mr. Basil—not at the Hall ; he was never there in the afternoon—but occasionally he would come across to Fircroft for a chat with Hubert, or to carry him off on some

business connected with the intended church at Braidley. My red-letter days were the days when a letter with the Leeds post-mark lay on the breakfast-table. There was no need for Aunt Catherine to tell me that she was happy. Every word, every sentence, breathed a fulness of content. From the very first she had thrown herself into her husband's work; she was living his life. It was 'our people,' 'our church,' our everything. Mr. Basil, who had paid them a three days' visit early in November, told me that Aunt Catherine was perfectly in her element.

'She is just the same,' he said, with a smile; 'she is as satisfied with her Vicarage as though it were a palace. Somehow it looks better than it used to look. She has the knack of making any place comfortable and home-like. The poor people are beginning to adore her as they do Mr. Fleming. As for him,' with an eloquent pause, 'he is content personified.'

Just before Advent Aunt Catherine came up for a brief visit to the Hall—a clergyman's week, they called it. Mr. Fleming was with her. I do not think she could have brought herself to leave him so soon; indeed, she told me that he never liked her to be absent for an hour.

'I am afraid we are a foolish old couple,' she added, laughing; 'but I have got my master now, and, indeed, I should not like to leave Robert; he has been alone too long already.'

It was happiness enough for me to know that Aunt Catherine was at the Hall, and to have some of our long talks, but there was something better still in store for me, for actually she took me back with her for a week.

'I think Olga has earned a week's holiday,' she said to Hubert; 'she has been working very hard, and young people sometimes need a change. I want her to see our Vicarage. My husband says I have made it so pretty, and then she will be able to picture the "Leeds Darby and Joan";' and of course she talked Hubert round to her opinion in a moment; indeed, she made him promise to come and fetch me back.

That week was one of the happiest I ever spent in my life. I was with Aunt Catherine from morning to night; she took me with her to her mothers' meetings, to her district, even to her Bible-class; and in spite of all her varied duties, she found plenty of leisure to talk to me.

'Well, Olga, are you satisfied about me?' she asked the last evening as we sat together in her pretty drawing-room waiting for Mr. Fleming's return from some parish meeting. 'Do you own now that I have nothing to regret, that I have found my right place?'

'Yes,' I returned in a low voice, for the door was open, and

Hubert was writing letters in the study. 'For myself, I do not like Leeds; I prefer Brookfield; but, after all, the town does not matter. The church is nice, and you have made your house so lovely. Your life is full of work, but I know you would not have it otherwise, and it is work you love.'

'I love it all,' she said simply. 'I think if they made Robert a bishop I should break my heart; I am prouder of being his wife—the wife of the Vicar of St. Mark's—than I should be if he were Archbishop of Canterbury. My life is perfect, Olga, and he has made it so;' and then she rose and went to the door as she heard his key in the lock, for early and late she was always ready to greet him—never too busy—too much absorbed to put down her work or book—to listen to what he had to say. Ah, no wonder she was happy, for, as far as a good man may, he worshipped her.

Our Christmas was a sad one; it was painful to see Hubert struggling to do his duty to all of us, and hardly able to summon up a smile when his children crowded round him with their little gifts. Happily, Christmas Day fell on a Sunday, and we could keep it quietly, and Hubert was in church most of the day. The children had their dessert in the nursery, and Reggie joined them; and I think in their own little way they were as happy as possible, though I could see Mab was thinking a good deal about her mother.

Harry had left us on Christmas Eve, and we all missed him excessively. He went away in very bad spirits, poor fellow! after solemnly assuring me that his own home was less dear to him than Fircroft. I am sorry to say he put the same question to me again, and asked if I could give him the faintest hope. My answer was too decided to leave him a moment's doubt. I was fond of him, but it was the fondness of a sister for a younger brother. I told him so frankly, and that ended it. I do not know how Jem found it out—I am half afraid poor Harry took him into confidence; but he came to me when Harry had driven away from the door, and said very kindly that I must not trouble myself. Harry was a good fellow, but he was not good enough for that, and of course I had done the right thing.

'He'll get over it after a time,' he went on; 'bless you! I have had these sort of attacks myself—well, perhaps not so badly, for I never proposed to a girl in my life; but Harry is young enough to fall in love half a dozen times before he settles;' and Jem patted me on the shoulder in a fatherly way and marched off, feeling that he had eased his conscience and done his duty. Really, Jem was a tower of strength to me in those days.

Jem had some visits to make during the Christmas vacation, and he was obliged to leave us on New Year's Eve. One of those visits was to a college friend living at South Kensington, and I knew then that he would see Violet frequently. His letters were full of her; he had met her at a concert, at an afternoon 'at home.' He was going to join them at the Albert Hall. They had asked him for a night or two to Addison Road; they were going to get up some private theatricals. In fact, Jem enjoyed his vacation to the full; his one regret was that I could not share his pleasure. Violet was so anxious to know more of me, he said, and Mrs. Campbell was always asking him to bring me again to see her.

'They say you are charming, Olga,' he wrote. 'I wonder if that is a bit of blarney just to please your humble servant; but I suppose a brother is no judge—anyhow, you are a dear little soul, and I am always

'Yours most affectionately,

'JEM.'

New Year's Day was ushered in by a long letter from Aunt Catherine, and a very pretty, indeed costly, present from Mrs. Lyndhurst—a little workcase, beautifully fitted up, and, indeed, far more fit for the use of a young princess than for Olga Leigh. I ran across to thank her, and to lecture her on her extravagance. She heard me good-humouredly:

'Catherine told me that you wanted a new workcase when she was here in November. I hope it is quite to your taste, for I could not choose it myself, and people are apt to make mistakes.'

I assured her it was lovely, only far too good for me. I longed to ask her who had selected it, but I had not the courage at the moment, and she began to talk about something else. She wanted me to put a fresh wreath on Aline's grave.

I generally went about once a week, with Mab and Jessie, to arrange fresh flowers or evergreens on Kitty's grave, and we always visited Aline's. It seemed a sort of weekly treat to the children; even Willie would plead to go. 'It is my turn to go to mother!' he would say. 'And mine, too,' Girlie would chime in; 'I'm mother's dirl, too!' It was wonderful how much we found to do, how busy the children would be. Sometimes they brought their little watering-pots, or planned what flowers they would plant for the summer; they would hush their little voices as they talked, as though they feared to wake that tender mother.

On this morning I went alone with Mrs. Lyndhurst's flowers

in my hands, but I saw somebody had been before me ; a lovely wreath lay on the marble step of the cross. Perhaps Mr. Basil had had it placed there. To my surprise a similar one was on Kitty's.

I questioned Hubert on my return ; he knew nothing about it. But, on my telling the children, Hugh interrupted me ; he had seen Marsden go into the churchyard, and she seemed to be carrying something very carefully ; and then the Squire had joined her, and they had gone down the little path together.

I was sitting alone that afternoon ; the children had all gone to a neighbour's, and Hubert was busy in his parish. The house felt very still and empty. Jane had lighted the lamp and drawn down the blinds, and had just placed the little tea-table beside me, when there was a ring at the door-bell, and the next moment Mr. Basil entered, bringing a rush of cold air with him.

'Are you quite alone?' he said, with evident surprise. 'Where's the Vicar? Shall I hunt him out of the study for you?'

I informed him that Hubert would not be home for an hour or two.

'Ah! and Jem has gone, and there is no Mr. Vivian; still, you ought not to be left alone on New Year's Day. Why does not Mab or Jessie come down to you?'

'They are all out; there is not a child in the house. It is Elsie Broderick's birthday, and they are spending the afternoon there—even Girlie has gone.'

'And they have left you alone—what a shame! If my mother had known that, she would have invited you up there. I don't like to see you sitting by yourself on New Year's evening.'

'Oh, I have Rollo!' I answered lightly, as I gave him a cup of tea and offered him the hot buttered cake for which cook was celebrated. I was not going to own how dull I had felt, and how pleased I had been to hear his ring; and even he had not wished me a 'Happy New Year.' I saw his eyes resting on my work-case.

'Do you like it?' he said rather eagerly. 'Is it what you wanted? Do you think it will be useful to you?'

'Very useful, only I am half afraid to open it. It is far too beautiful for use!'

'Nonsense! you must never use anything else!'

And then, as he had finished his tea, he gave me a description of a New Year's Day he had once spent with a friend in Paris, and how they had driven about from one house to another. His friend was a Frenchman, and he told me how this man had nearly ruined himself in bouquets and cadeaux of all descriptions.

'That was my mother's present,' he said by and by, as he crossed the rug to examine the workcase again. 'You must have your initials engraved on it. I told the man there was no time.' So Mr. Basil must have chosen it that day he went to town. He seemed to think he had made a slip, for he put it down hurriedly: 'Every one gives you presents—my mother, Aunt Catherine, even Reggie—only I am not permitted to offer anything.'

'Oh, gentlemen do not make presents,' I returned, somewhat confused by his manner.

'Only under certain circumstances,' speaking rather gravely; then, very earnestly and persuasively: 'I do want to give you something; I have wanted it for a long time. May I tell you what it is? There is only one thing that I can offer you, though I doubt whether you will think it worthy of your acceptance; but it is yours already, Olga, and I think you know it.'

His look left me in no doubt of his meaning, and he had taken my hand very gently as he spoke. I tried to draw it away. I tried to answer him, but I could only tremble and blush—he had taken me so by surprise; but he was right. In my heart, though I would have died rather than have confessed it, I knew he cared for me.

My silence seemed to trouble him.

'Why do you not speak?' he said, in rather an agitated voice; 'why do you not answer me? Have I startled you?—surely not. You must have seen all this time how fond I have been of you; only it would not have been right to speak before.'

'No, of course not;' but I did not dare look at him.

'But it is more than a year now, and there is nothing wrong in my speaking to you this evening. Would you rather have had me wait a little longer—does your silence mean that?' stooping over me and taking my other hand.

'No, no,' I returned desperately, for he was compelling me to speak, and I knew, difficult as it was to tell him, that it was better to say the truth at once; 'there is nothing wrong in speaking to me in this way, but I wish—I wish you had not spoken, when I cannot—when I am not able to take what you offer me.' I felt him start; he dropped my hands, and the next moment he asked me in quite a different voice to look at him. He spoke so quietly that I did so at once. 'I am so sorry,' I faltered; 'you must know how sorry I am.'

His only answer was to put aside the little tea-table and draw up a chair beside me. I think he felt his great height a disadvantage. Then he said more calmly:

'I knew I should read the truth in your face, but your words

were a little ambiguous. If you are sorry, why are you trying to refuse me? for you are trying, are you not?’

‘Because I must,’ I returned, almost in despair. ‘Oh, Mr. Basil, you ought not to have asked me! How am I to think of such things with Hubert and the children?’

‘Is that your only reason against it?’ he asked very quickly.

‘Yes, of course;’ but I did not in the least understand how much I was admitting until his next words told me.

‘Thank you, darling; that is all I want to know. I was afraid for the moment whether I had made a mistake, and if you really cared; but I know how true you are: now I can listen more comfortably. I want you to tell me, Olga, exactly how you feel about things, just as though—as though I were Jem.’

I was a little too shy to speak at first, but he was so gentle and patient with me. I remember he asked me whether I minded him being a widower, whether I thought he was to be trusted now, and whether I did not care more for Reggie than for him. I suppose my answers on these points satisfied him, for he begged me again not to think of his feelings; that he was putting himself and his love for me out of the question; that he wanted to know what I felt, and to help me as much as possible. And then I did talk to him; and when I began the words came quite easily.

I told him everything, even about my talks with Kitty, and how she hoped I should stay some time with Hubert and the children.

‘Did she mention any period of time?’ he asked anxiously, and when I returned, ‘She only said a year or two,’ he smiled and looked relieved.

But he looked grave again when I spoke of Hubert’s loneliness, and asked him how I could leave him in this big house with only the little girls to take care of him. Then I repeated Aunt Catherine’s words the night before she left the Hall. ‘She said she was leaving me happily because I was in the path of duty, and she did not wish me to worry myself;’ and then I told him what she had said about standing still until the way opened.

I never could have believed that he would have listened so quietly. I felt I could have told him anything. I was talking as freely to him as I did to Jem, and he was so anxious to put me at my ease, that he hardly seemed to think of himself. If I had not cared for him before, I must have cared that evening.

When I had quite finished, he said it was his turn now, and then I found that he was not quite convinced, and that he wanted to refer the matter to Hubert.

‘It is not as though I were asking you to leave Brookfield,’ he

urged ; 'the Hall is so close, you can be here every day, and half the day, if you will. You can be mistress of the Hall and Firecroft too ;' but I would not let him go on—the thing was impossible. I could not do my duty to him and to Hubert too ; we must just go on as we were until I saw my way more plainly. He must not speak to Hubert ; Kitty had not been dead quite a year yet, and I could not have him worried.

'But you do not think of me,' he complained. 'I wish I could feel you cared for me half as much as I do for you. You do not know what you are to me, Olga ;' and then he implored me to be engaged to him ; he would wait a year—two, even three—if he were only sure of me ; but I would not listen.

'You are sure of me,' I said, in a low voice, so that he had some difficulty in hearing me, but I think he heard. 'I could never care for any one else.'

'Then you do love me a little ?'

'Yes, yes ;' but I would not look at him, for I was anxious to have it properly settled, and he must not know for a long time how much I really cared for him. It was breaking my heart to send him away from me ; indeed, the strain was telling on me visibly. He saw it at last.

'I have made you look quite pale—I am tiring you out !' he said, a little remorsefully. 'Olga ! why are you so obdurate ? why will you not be convinced ? You are raising all these difficulties, and you will not let me help you to surmount them ; how are we to go on like this—just caring for each other ? If there is no engagement, I shall have to go away.'

'If we were engaged, Hubert must know, and Jem, and every one ; and then people would expect other things !' for I could not explain myself more clearly.

He laughed a little at that, but owned I might be right.

'Mr. Leigh would know, of course,' he said thoughtfully.

'Yes ; and then he would trouble himself about it. Mr. Basil, please do not say any more—you must see I am right ! If you would only go away now, and try to forget you have spoken !'

'That is so likely !' he returned rather dryly. 'Olga, how dreadfully firm you can be ! Well, I will go, because you are looking so pale and tired ; but you must say something nice to me first—tell me you are not really sorry about this !'

'No, I am not sorry in the way you mean.'

His face brightened.

'Well, I will go home, and think what is best to be done—what is best for you as well as for me'—pressing my hand. 'You have given me the right to say that by owning that you care for

me a little!’ He looked round the room, and then at me—a long, wistful look that touched me inexpressibly. ‘It is hard to leave you, but I must go—God bless you, dear!’ and then he went.

I went up to my room at once—nurse had lighted the fire—and I flung myself down on the rug, and buried my face in the cushions of my easy-chair. I had restrained my tears with difficulty; now they could have their vent. Basil loved me, and I had sent him away—was there any wonder I should be unhappy? All the scales were fallen from my eyes now. I knew that he was dearer to me than anything in life, and yet I had sent him away!

CHAPTER XLVII

‘IS THERE ANYTHING YOU HAVE TO TELL ME?’

‘Be sure of this—
What I can help thee to, thou shalt not miss.’
All's Well that Ends Well.

‘A friend is some one who can finish your sentences for you.’—*Anon.*

HUBERT came in, and then the children. I could hear their voices chattering to nurse on the stairs. I jumped up and bathed my eyes, and then went into the schoolroom to bid them ‘Good-night’ and hear their account of the evening. I found them examining their little gifts, for there had been a Christmas-tree; they were eager to show me everything, and tell me how much they had enjoyed themselves.

‘Hugh has a box of chocolate; but he is keeping it for father. Father always used to eat mother’s chocolate-drops—don’t you remember, Jessie? And these sweets are all for you, Aunt Olga, because you have been all by yourself this afternoon;’ and Mab pressed her cheek affectionately against my shoulder.

‘Elsie is such a pretty little girl,’ observed Jessie; ‘and Mrs. Broderick has a nice trustable face. What do you think she said to us, auntie? She kissed us half a dozen times, and called us poor little darlings, because we had crape on our best frocks, and because mother has gone to heaven.’

‘She kissed me too,’ put in Willie, with his mouth full of sweets.

Girlie had been carried off rather cross and fractious.

‘Yes, and Mab told her that we were not so poor as some little girls we knew, because we had father and you, Aunt Olga, to take care of us. And Mrs. Broderick said: “Ah, my dear, but you may not always have your aunt; she is young, and——”’

and then some one said "Hush!" and she stopped. What did she mean, auntie?"

'Auntie isn't never going to leave us!' interposed Wilfred, with a sticky hug.

'Not until I grow up, and can give cook the orders,' returned Mab firmly; and then they all chimed in.

Oh, how my heart ached to hear them! It was a relief when the gong sounded for me to go down to dinner.

Hubert looked white and jaded; he scarcely spoke a word all dinner-time, and as soon as it was over he went into the study. I asked if I should bring my work and sit with him, but he shook his head. When Jane took him in his coffee she found him fast asleep. I was happier in my mind when she told me that, for I knew he would sleep heavily until bedtime; he had walked too far, and had exhausted himself, but in the old days Hubert had never been so tired.

I had food enough for my thoughts. I did not attempt to check them; they had travelled back strangely to St. Croix—to La Maissonnette. I was in the little grove; Reggie was swinging in the hammock; a tall figure, in a little gray cap, with a free, easy gait, was striding down the path. I could hear the click of the gate, even the 'Miss Leigh' pronounced in the clear, decided voice; but it was not the stranger of the pavilion—it was the young Squire, the master of Brookfield Hall, who had been with me this afternoon.

Could it be possible that Basil Lyndhurst—one of the Seftons—had asked me to be his wife? What would Aunt Catherine say? And Reggie—but I must not think of Reggie. I must not even think of Basil: the hardest part was over; I had sent him away, and now I must just go on living my life. I tried to look it in the face, to be reasonable. Could I not be happy, feeling so sure of his love? He would be near me; I should see him sometimes; we should be friends; and in my heart I should always know what he felt for me!

My answer to this was plain: I could be happy if only he would be satisfied; but I knew his nature too well—patience was not his forte. Life and trouble had not disciplined him; before long I knew he would chafe against my restrictions; perhaps he would be angry and go away.

It was the fear of this that was making me miserable—the fear that my influence would not be sufficient. Tenderly as he loved me, much as he revered me, his will was a strong one, and might rise up against my girlish decision. The very tone in which he had said, 'I must think what is best for you as well as

for me,' showed me that he was by no means subservient to my opinion. His one anxiety had been to learn my feelings towards himself; the rest had seemed of little consequence.

How I wished I could have brought him round to my opinion! I had wanted him so much to agree with me, if he would only spare me any conflict of wills; but I had been so shy in letting him know my feelings, that perhaps he did not realise how hard it would be for me to fight against him. I did so long to make him happy; he had suffered so cruelly, and I could give him just what he wanted; but no, I must not think of that. 'It was Hubert, not Basil, who was my duty—not Basil! not Basil!' I repeated, with tears.

I passed a restless night, and woke unrefreshed. When Hubert met me at breakfast he asked me if I had a headache, but I answered evasively. I had not mentioned Mr. Basil's visit; I felt I could not utter his name. It was snowing heavily, and Reggie did not come to me as usual. I sat in the nursery all the morning, working at the sewing-machine. The weather would afford me a good excuse for not going to the Hall; I felt under any circumstances I could not have gone. I kept the children with me all the afternoon. Mr. Montague dined with us; but I have not the faintest recollection what he and Hubert talked about. Only once I saw Hubert looking at me through his spectacles, as though he wondered why I was so silent. Mr. Montague left us directly dinner was over—he had an evening engagement in the village—and then Hubert proposed of his own accord that I should accompany him to the study. He drew up the low chair himself to the fire; it was Kitty's, and her little standing workbasket was near it, with one of Wilfred's unfinished shirts in it, and the gold thimble Hubert had given her.

'Sit there, my dear,' he said, in his kind, sad voice. And as he lighted his reading-lamp, and adjusted the green shade that he always used, he continued: 'So Lyndhurst was here yesterday? I do not remember your mentioning it, Olga.'

I was so startled that I nearly upset my little workcase.

'You were so tired last night,' I stammered. 'Have you—have you seen him this afternoon?'

'No; only his stick is in the hall; and I asked Jane, and she said he had tea here in the afternoon. I suppose he waited to see me? I know he wanted those plans Royston drew up. I almost think I had better send them across this evening, if it has left off snowing. I suppose Jane or Martha could go?'

'Certainly, if you wish it;,' but just as he was drawing aside the curtain to look out, the hall-bell sounded, and after a moment's

suspense—for Hubert never encouraged evening visitors—the door opened, and Mr. Basil walked in.

He had thrown off his ulster, and was in evening dress, as he had just risen from the dinner-table. I was so surprised to see him, for he had never come so late before—so pleased, so overwhelmed with confusion altogether, that I found it impossible to meet him as usual; and I could only hope that Hubert did not notice my silence and my burning cheeks. Happily, Mr. Basil spared me as much as possible, for he shook hands hastily, and at once engaged Hubert in talk—in fact, he had never been more fluent. Hubert could not get in a word at all. He apologised for coming so late, but he had been at Braidley all the afternoon in spite of the snow; and he had seen Royston, and now he wanted to look at the plans.

‘I need not trouble to look over them here,’ he went on; ‘I will just carry them across with me, and go through them on Monday morning;’ and, after a little more talk, Hubert said they were upstairs in his dressing-room, and that he would fetch them. Another time I should have offered to save him the trouble, but I was actually too shy to open my lips.

The moment he had left the room Mr. Basil came to my side.

‘Do put down your work for a moment,’ he pleaded. ‘Why do you seem afraid of me to-night? Was it wrong to come? I give you my word, I was obliged to furbish up these old plans as an excuse. I could not keep away; I was just pining for a sight of you.’

‘And I for you,’ I could have said with truth, for it was such a delight to see him there. I had been making myself so miserable all day, thinking that he was hurt at my sending him away—that he had not understood what it cost me; but I was obliged to confess to myself that he seemed as usual—not at all depressed; he looked handsome and eager. As he spoke he put his hands forcibly on my work.

‘I do not think you ought to have come,’ was all I could bring myself to say; but I suppose my face belied my words, for he looked as happy as possible.

‘But you are pleased to see me—you know you are pleased to see me,’ in a coaxing voice; ‘and you look ever so much better than you did last night. Olga, you do not know how restless I have been all day; it will not answer at all. You will have to give in—to reconsider your decision. I must talk to Aunt Catherine and Mr. Leigh. Your friends must not allow you to sacrifice yourself, if it be a sacrifice,’ stooping over me a little closer.

'Oh, please—please do not say any more to-night!' I whispered. 'Hubert will be here directly; he will guess, and then everything will go wrong;' but he did not take the hint quickly enough, for he was still standing close to me when Hubert returned with the plans—only I had got possession of my work, and the shades of silk were difficult to match by lamp-light, so perhaps he thought Mr. Basil had been helping me, for he apparently took no notice.

Coffee was sent in after this, and Mr. Basil stayed some time. I tried to take my part in the conversation, to appear at my ease, but my changing colour and short, breathless sentences betrayed my nervousness. How was I to talk to Mr. Basil with the old friendliness? In his new character he confused me, and yet I thought none became him so well. No girl had ever had such a lover. I am sure he went away at last because he saw how it was with me. Hubert went to the door with him.

'It is a rough night, Lyndhurst,' I heard him say as they shook hands.

I was folding up my work when Hubert came back to me; he looked thoughtful and preoccupied; but as I bade him good-night, he asked me to stay a little longer, and I sat down again reluctantly. He did not inquire, as usual, if I were tired.

'Is there anything you have to say to me, Olga?' he asked so pointedly that I stared at him in dismay.

'No; nothing, thank you,' I returned in a very small voice.

'Nothing that I ought to know, that you would tell Jem if he were here.'

'Certainly not!' flushing to my finger-ends. The idea of my telling Jem that!

'You must forgive me if I am a little clumsy, my dear,' he went on in the kindest voice; 'but I cannot forget how young you are, and you have no mother, and no sister now to advise you'—of course he was thinking of Kitty—'and Jem is young too; so, perhaps, I should really be able to help you best if you could only bring yourself to confide in me. Do, my dear, for I feel a little anxious about you.'

'About me, Hubert?'

'Yes. Hasn't the Squire been making love to you? I am sure I beg your pardon, Olga, if I am making a mistake; but from his manner and yours it was impossible not to suspect something of the kind; and as your guardian I have a right to know such matters.'

Hubert was speaking with mild dignity, but he was regarding me affectionately. There was no escape for me now. Mr. Basil's

boyish impatience had frustrated my plans. If Hubert knew our little secret, there would be a complication. I was angry with myself for my absurd shyness. If I had only laughed and talked as usual, Hubert would never have suspected anything.

I never knew how kind Hubert could be ; he drew the truth from me in the gentlest manner. He even made me confess that I was by no means indifferent to the young Squire ; that if things had been otherwise I should have given him another answer.

‘It is a very good match,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘How pleased old Jem will be ! he has quite changed his opinion of Lyndhurst. He thinks him a fine fellow now ; so do I. My dear little sister, nothing could be better ; you must be engaged to him at once.’

The quiet matter-of-fact way in which Hubert spoke almost took my breath away, but I managed to stammer out the words :

‘Impossible ! how could I leave those poor children ?’

He looked very grave at that, but his manner did not alter.

‘Don’t, my dear,’ for the tears were in my eyes now ; ‘let us have a little talk together. Draw your chair closer to me, and let me see your face. I want to tell you something. My poor darling spoke to me on this very subject.’

‘Oh no, Hubert !’ in a shocked voice, for Aline had not been dead two months then.

‘She did not mention names, but, all the same, I am sure Lyndhurst was in her mind. Kitty was so clever ; she saw things sooner than other people. Most likely it occurred to her as a possibility. “Olga is sure to marry,” she said to me one night when we had been talking of the children. “I shall be glad if she will stop with you for a year or two.” And then she made me promise that I would not allow you to sacrifice yourself for the children.’

Dear Kitty ! that was so like her, and she had said the same thing to me.

“Olga is so generous that she will not think of herself or her own happiness ; when the time comes you must think for her, Hubert”—those were her very words. “She will have no one but you and Jem to help her ; you must do your best for her, as though she were Mab.” Olga, I am going to do my very best for you. How old are you, my dear ?’

But I would not answer him ; I must have my say too. I put my arms round his neck for the second time in my life, and hid my face on his shoulder, and implored him, with sobs, to listen to me. I told him that I could not leave him and the children, not even for Basil’s sake ; that though I loved him—I loved him

dearly—I could not be happy in neglecting my duty ; this, and much more, in broken, incoherent sentences.

He was very much touched, and had to take off his spectacles to wipe them.

'Thank you, thank you, my dear,' he kept saying in a husky voice ; but when I was a little calmer he asked me again how old I was.

'I shall be one-and-twenty next June,' was my answer.

'Kitty was younger than that,' he sighed ; 'but there is plenty of time, Olga ; you must not fret so. I am not asking you to leave us now ; no, my dear, I could not spare you just yet. But we must think of Lyndhurst ; I will talk to him and find out his wishes. If he would not think eighteen months too long for an engagement, you could marry him on your twenty-second birthday. You would have helped me for more than two years then, and by that time I shall be able to arrange something.'

'But, Hubert, the children——' but he would not let me go on.

'They are my children, not yours,' with a smile ; 'the matter is not so difficult as you suppose. Things are changed. I have no pupils, and Montague helps me with the parish. I have more time to give to the children, and you forget what a treasure we have in nurse ; and then,' patting my hand in an encouraging way, 'the Hall is only a few hundred yards off ; you could still supervise Fircroft, and see to the little girls' frocks, for I could not undertake that department. We should see you every day, and by and by my Mab—God bless her!—will be able to look after her sisters and brothers ; she is quite a little woman now in her way. I never saw a child of ten so thoughtful before.'

I argued a little more with Hubert. It seemed to me as though that night I were fighting against my love for Basil and the knowledge of my forthcoming happiness ; but I found Hubert mildly inexorable : he would not listen to me for a moment. My grand plans for martyrdom were all put aside with fine masculine scorn.

'We have Lyndhurst to consider,' he kept saying ; 'you have treated us both badly. I am your legal guardian, and have a right to know all your affairs, and you left me in the dark about the Squire's offer.'

I felt a sudden qualm as he said this ; he had never guessed at Harry's attachment, and would have been much shocked to hear that his favourite pupil had made me two offers. A guilty colour suffused my face as I remembered poor Harry ; but his secret was safe with me. Jem knew it, but he would never betray Harry to Hubert.

'I think you the luckiest girl in the world,' he continued; 'think of being mistress of that fine old place! Who would have guessed that our little Olga would have won our young Squire?'

And then he looked at me rather critically, as though to find out where the attraction lay, and I thought of Jem's brotherly critique.

'He is a wise man,' he went on after a scarcely perceptible pause. 'He has had enough of beauty with his first wife; he wants something better now;' and then he took my face between his hands and kissed it. 'Go to bed now, my dear, for we have said enough for to-night. I have quite forgotten that it is Saturday, and I have to look over my sermon for to-morrow, and it is past eleven now.'

'Oh, Hubert, I am so sorry to have kept you!' and then I left him.

What had become of my unhappiness? Why could I not be sorry that all this had happened—that Hubert had discovered our secret? But I could be sorry for nothing. I could only think of Basil—how he had looked, and what he had said that evening; and how his presence had glorified Hubert's shabby old study, and transformed it into a sort of earthly paradise.

I was glad that the next day was Sunday. I was sure of seeing him in church; and, perhaps, after service, he might join us in the churchyard. It would be awkward to see him with Hubert; but I knew at that time Hubert would be in the vestry, and there would be no one but Reggie and the children near us, for Mrs. Lyndhurst never came to church in the winter.

He came in late—he was often late—but as he and Reggie passed our seat, he half turned and looked at me—a quick, searching look. But I hardly dared raise my eyes again from my book all the service. How little he knew the mischief he had done by his visit last night! Once, and only once, during the sermon I ventured to glance in his direction. His head was bent; he was evidently thinking deeply. He looked quiet, composed, thoughtful—I wondered if the sermon engaged his attention.

Reggie ran after us, as usual, in the churchyard, and I stooped down and kissed him; and the next moment Mr. Basil joined us, and we walked together to the gate. Mab was on one side of me and Willie on the other; Reggie had hold of his father's hand. The children were all chattering, so that he could not find an opportunity to say more than a word.

'How are you?' he asked quickly. 'Shall you come up to the Hall to see my mother?'

I shook my head.

'When may I come again—your brother does not like Sunday visitors, I know—to-morrow? Oh yes; I must bring those plans back to-morrow. Will you give me a cup of tea? Good morning, Mrs. Broderick! what severe weather we are having! there will be some more snow before night.'

Mrs. Broderick and her daughters had joined us. The youngest, Cissie, a very pretty girl, was looking at the Squire; he could scarcely disengage himself to bid me good-bye.

'I shall try to come to-morrow or Tuesday,' he said, in a low voice. 'I must speak to you alone—you will have to give way!' and then he quietly stepped back to Miss Cissie.

But as I walked on with the children, I determined nothing would induce me to see him alone. How was I to tell him about my conversation with Hubert? he had no right to come again so soon. He was behaving exactly as though I had accepted him. He was not bearing himself in the least like a rejected suitor. I began to feel I had not done the thing properly.

I went to church in the evening with Mab, but the Hall seat was unoccupied. Most likely Mr. Basil had stayed at home to read to his mother. I certainly attended to the service better; and Mr. Montague's sermon was excellent.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE WAY OPENS

'I heard his deep "I will"
Breathed, like the covenant of a God, to hold
From thence thro' all the worlds.'

The Gardener's Daughter.

'O happy world . . . all, meseems,
Are happy; I the happiest of them all.'

TENNYSON.

'Oh, but she will love him truly!
He shall have a cheerful home;
She will order all things duly,
When beneath his roof they come.'

The Lord of Burleigh.

I HAD no time to myself the next morning. When I came down to breakfast a note was awaiting me from Miss Boyle. Her sister had been taken ill on Saturday night with some internal inflammation, and Dr. Langham thought very badly of her. Hubert said at once that he would go down to Fir Cottage to inquire after the invalid, while I gave the children their lessons. He brought me a very bad report at luncheon-time. Poor Miss Rosina was dying, and he had found our Miss Boyle in great trouble. We had all become very much attached to her; she was a worthy, kind-hearted creature, and so humble-minded with all her cleverness. I begged Hubert to let me go and offer my services, but he said she had a cousin with her, a very nice person, and that I should be only in the way.

'The greatest comfort I could give Miss Boyle,' he went on, 'was in telling her that you would take her place with Mab and Jessie. I begged her to be perfectly easy on that point, as you and I would manage the lessons between us. Let them come to me for their history and arithmetic; it will be such a pleasure to

teach them something;' and as Mab and Jessie were charmed with this idea, they went regularly to the study for an hour during the three weeks Miss Boyle stayed away, and I believe all three were sorry when her return put a stop to lessons with their father.

As the weather did not permit the little girls to take their usual walk with nurse, I sat with them in the schoolroom all the afternoon, while they amused themselves making scrap-books for the children's hospital. This was a favourite occupation with them. I did not venture into the drawing-room until I knew Jane had taken in the tea, and then I invited the twins to join me. I could never count on Hubert; and if Mr. Basil kept his word the little girls would hinder any private talk. I felt very artful and diplomatic as I went down with Mab and Jessie hanging on either arm. They were in high spirits, and wanted to know if the drawing-room cake were nicer than the schoolroom one.

'When I am grown up, and give cook orders,' observed Mab, 'I shall always say plum-cake instead of seed; no one but Willy likes seedy-cakes, Aunt Olga.'

I was beginning to think I had schemed in vain as we drank our tea, for no ring at the door-bell announced a visitor. To be sure, he said 'to-morrow or Tuesday.' Never mind, Mab and Jessie must be invited again to-morrow; and I tried to dismiss the subject from my mind, and to give myself up to the children, who were in high glee. By and by Hubert joined us; he looked tired and weary, but brightened up as Jessie flew to him, and Mab pushed a heavy armchair closer to the fire.

'Are you keeping Aunt Olga company, my darlings? Mab, do you think you could pour me out a cup of tea? I want Aunt Olga to do something for me. Olga, do you remember those papers old Mrs. Steventon gave me about that good-for-nothing son of hers? They were in a thick blue envelope; and I know I put them in one of the racks on my writing-table. Do you think you could find them, my dear?'

'I will look, Hubert. Jessie, that cake is cold. There is some hot toast on the trivet for father;' and I went away quickly.

The study-door was half closed. As I pushed it open I came face to face with Mr. Basil!

'You have come to look for Mrs. Steventon's papers?' he said coolly. 'That's all right; but the Vicar does not want them for the next hour;' and then he closed the door, and the next moment I found myself held fast. 'How could you have the heart to do it?' he was saying; 'how could you have the heart to send me away, my darling?'

I never knew how pertinacious Basil could be ; he gave me no peace until I had answered his questions. I found, to my surprise, that his self-distrust was so great, that he thought so little of himself, and so much of me, that he could not bring himself to believe that I really cared for him ; when I found out what he felt, I did all I could to satisfy him, and he was so grateful to me for my frank confession.

'I know I am not worthy of you,' he said humbly, as he drew me closer to him ; 'but you have done much for me already, and you will do more. I always looked up to you as a little saint, Olga. Do you remember, dear, that evening of our dinner-party, when my poor Aline disgraced herself? I shall never forget what I felt when you put your arms round her, and laid your cheek against hers! "Come with me, and I will take care of you." Was not that what you said? Olga, it was all I could do not to bless you aloud for your goodness. I felt neither Aline nor I was fit to kiss the ground under your dear feet.'

'Oh, Basil, do not talk so! It was no goodness. I loved her—I always loved her.'

'I believe you did ; that is why I sent you her ring. Darling, you will have to wear my ring now, for Mr. Leigh—what a brick he is!—thinks that we may as well be engaged at once.'

'It was all your fault,' I began ; but he knew too well to let me finish.

'What a good thought it was my fetching those plans on Saturday evening! I meant to behave as well as possible ; but when I saw you change colour every minute I knew it was all up with our secret. When he had it out with me just now, I told him that I considered myself engaged. "That's all right," he said, with a laugh ; "I will send Olga in, and then you can settle it." And we have settled it, haven't we, dear?'

I tried to tell him now about my conversation with Hubert, for he was so happy, and in such spirits, that there was no keeping him to the point. He kept asking me unnecessary questions—how long I had liked him—as though I could possibly answer that question ; if I really and truly cared for him more than Jem.

'I was always jealous of that fellow,' he said.

'Dear Jem!' I sighed.

'Yes ; but he does not come first now, or Reggie either.'

'No, of course not. Reggie! What an idea! As though I should put him before you! Do let me tell you about Hubert.'

'No,' he said, with rather a dejected air. 'I know what you are going to say, and I have heard it already. We are to be engaged for eighteen months—until you are two-and-twenty. I was

obliged to agree to everything, for fear of losing you altogether ; but——'

'You think eighteen months—a poor little year and a half—too long to wait for me. Mr. Fleming waited eight-and-twenty years for Aunt Catherine.'

I ought to have known Basil better ; he was not likely to submit tamely to such a reproof, and I had to listen to a long harangue, made with a great deal of energy. He would wait for me half his life, he said, if duty demanded it. He was quite sure of me ; I was not the girl to tell a fellow she loved him and then change her mind, and on that point I had made him quite happy, perfectly happy ; but, all the same, he wanted to marry me as soon as possible. I could not blame him for wishing this ; any fellow in his circumstances would be as anxious as he was ; and he must call my attention to one point, that in his case it was not so much selfishness as a clear-sighted thoughtfulness for other people. He was afraid that I was not sufficiently alive to his virtues ; when he said other people, he did not presume to place me amongst them, as he was far too painfully convinced that I would agree cheerfully to an eighteen years' engagement.

'Oh, Basil !' in a shocked voice at this point.

No ; I must not interrupt him. He was speaking of his mother, who was so clearly in need of a daughter, and of Reggie, whose infantile years certainly pleaded for maternal management. Basil's face was a study as he completed this audacious speech.

But I was not to be silenced by any flow of eloquence, and in spite of many interruptions, I had my say at last. I told Basil that he had made me so happy, so very happy, that there was no room in my heart for selfishness ; that he must let me do my duty to Hubert and the children, and not be too exacting, for I loved him so much—yes, I actually told him that—that a word from him, even a gesture of impatience, would pain me terribly ; and when he saw how earnest I was he did not tease me any more, and nothing could exceed his gentleness.

'My little sunbeam,' he said, very tenderly, 'I cannot have you look so grave ; don't you know a word from you is enough ? I quite understand, my dearest, and I promise you that you shall never have anything to bear from my impatience.'

'And you will be happy, Basil ?'

'Perfectly happy and content in waiting for you, do you mean ? Yes ; a thousand times, yes. From this day we begin our new life together, for I shall do nothing without you, decide nothing, enjoy nothing. I shall see you every day ; I shall be here as much as possible. Olga, can that possibly be the dressing-bell ?'

I looked at the clock in dismay—half-past six—and we had been talking for an hour and a half. Basil looked amused at my horrified expression, and suggested that we should go in search of Hubert. We found him quietly reading by the fire. The little girls had gone upstairs. He looked up with a smile as we entered.

‘Have you brought me the papers, Olga?’ he asked, and then he opened his arms to me.

Oh, how dear and good Hubert was to us both that night! He would not let Basil leave us; and, indeed, as he whispered to me afterwards, he had no intention of going; and when dinner was over, he talked to us in so kind and fatherly a manner, and he made me so proud and happy by praising me to Basil. I never knew how much I loved him until that night.

Basil took me the next day to see his mother; she literally wept for joy, and I was ready to join her, when she confessed that this had been for months the wish of her heart, and afterwards we both wrote to Aunt Catherine and Jem.

Their answers perfectly satisfied me. Aunt Catherine’s was very short, but every word expressed her perfect contentment.

‘You have made me very happy,’ she wrote; ‘nothing earthly could have pleased me more. I shall not now have a care for Basil; you will suit his peculiar nature utterly and entirely. And, Olga, you have long been very dear to me; now you will be one of us,’ and so on—such a letter as only Aunt Catherine could write.

As for Jem’s, it was so perfectly unique, so altogether delicious, that Basil said I ought to have it framed as a model of brotherly correspondence. The dear fellow was literally brimming over with fun and affection and satisfied ambition—only one sentence was quite grave:

‘I have long ago changed my opinion about Lyndhurst; I always thought he had the makings of a fine fellow, only I distrusted him for a while. I do not now own that he is perfectly worthy of you; there is not a fellow living good enough for such a dear little soul; but he will do, and I have made up my mind to give you a blessing, so here goes,’ et cetera, et cetera. Oh, how we laughed over that letter!

We had been engaged about ten days; poor Miss Rosina Boyle had been buried nearly a week, and her sister had not yet resumed her duties, when one afternoon, as I was giving Mab her music-lesson, there was a knock at the door, and Basil entered. I was beginning to be accustomed to see him at any time in the day, for he was seldom absent for many hours from Fircroft. He would snatch half an hour whenever he could to talk over any little matter with

me that interested him. This time he had brought me a message from his mother; she wanted me particularly, he said. Could not Mab finish her music by herself? I made a little demur at this, but he was very urgent. He was not going back to the Hall for an hour or two—he had to ride to Braidley; he begged me to remain until he returned, but I would not promise this.

‘Well, we will leave that part,’ he replied, with a smile that told me that he was pretty certain to get his way, ‘only do go now as quickly as possible; in fact, I mean to wait until I see you out of the house;’ and seeing this was his mood, I told Mab to finish her scales by herself, and put on my hat as quickly as possible.

Ladybird was waiting for her master, and I left Basil for a moment while I fetched her some sugar. The pretty creature knew me well, for I had always petted her. I could not help looking after my Squire as he rode off, Basil always looked so well on horseback. He saw me and waved his hat gaily, and then I walked on.

I thought Bennett looked unusually pleased to see me, but he asked me to wait in the library a few minutes before I went to his mistress. This somewhat surprised me, for I was unused to any formality at the Hall; but I understood his motive better the next moment, when I found myself folded in Aunt Catherine’s arms. My ecstasy may be imagined. So this was the reason, then, why Basil had been so urgent with me.

The surprise was so great for a moment that I could only kiss her without speaking, and I could see there were tears in her soft gray eyes.

‘Are you pleased to see me, Olga? My dear, I could not stay away any longer. I was just longing to see you and Basil, so I made Robert bring me, and we have been here since one o’clock. We slept at St. Jude’s Vicarage last night, and came on here this morning.’

‘And you have seen Basil?’

‘Yes; and talked to him, too. How happy the boy is! he looks better and younger already; and—well, darling, I think you can imagine our conversation.’

‘You have no idea how good he is to me!’ rather shyly.

‘Come, you shall tell me about it; that is why I told Bennett to show you into the library, because I wanted you all to myself. Do you know how refreshing it is to see your sweet little face? Basil says you are just an embodied sunbeam! I call that a very pretty, lover-like speech.’

Oh, what a talk we had! I felt then as though my happiness

were complete. Aunt Catherine was the only one to whom I could tell everything; she understood in a moment that my one anxiety was how long Basil's patience would last out.

'It will last as long as it is needed,' was her comfortable answer. 'Basil is perfectly content to wait a reasonable time, and he thinks Mr. Leigh's stipulation very reasonable under the circumstances; of course, if it had been possible, he would rather have married you at once, but he will not let himself think of that—Basil is not the least selfish.'

'Oh no! no one could be less so, Aunt Catherine. I hope you will not think me fidgety; but, indeed, I do not see how Hubert is to spare me even then!'

'Do you not? Well, I have an idea on the subject; and so has Basil. Your news about poor Miss Rosina Boyle put the notion in my head; her sister's death has set Miss Boyle free to take your place.'

'My place!'

'Well, perhaps not that exactly, for she could not be Mr. Leigh's companion; but, as regards the children and the care of the household, she could certainly take your place; indeed, I never knew any person so entirely trustworthy. If she be the plainest, she is certainly one of the nicest people I know.'

'Do you mean that she should come and live at Fircroft?'

'Perhaps not live there entirely; but that must depend on Mr. Leigh's wishes. But what could be easier than for her to come every morning, and remain until the children's bedtime? She might still keep her rooms at Fir Cottage, and so maintain her independence; but, in my opinion, there is nothing to prevent a woman of her age—and she looks fifty at least—taking charge of a widower's household. She is not young, at least in her appearance, or attractive enough to make such a position awkward; but, as I said before, this is for your brother to arrange.'

'And you think that by that time I can be spared?'

'That the way will open. Yes, Olga, I do think so, and Basil is sure of it. With Miss Boyle at Fircroft, and you at the Hall, there can be very little difficulty in the matter. You will always be on the spot to supervise or consult with Miss Boyle; she will be able to refer all feminine questions to you. The children will be with you constantly—every day—they will bring their little affairs to you to settle; your brother will do the same. Are you convinced now that every one is right in not allowing you to martyr yourself?'

'Yes; and I could not do it. I could not give up Basil; but still it troubles me to think of Hubert being all alone.'

'Put that out of your head for the present ; in another year he will be more fit to be left. His children will occupy his thoughts, and give interest to his life ; he is strong enough and good enough to stand alone. You know how highly I have always thought of him—but never so highly as now, when I have watched him in his trouble.'

'He is an example to us all ; even Basil says so.'

'Basil respects him as much as I do. Well, my dear, he will still have his faithful little sister near him. What can be more easy than for you and Basil to sacrifice an evening now and then to cheer him in his solitude or to coax him up to the Hall ? not to mention the hours you will contrive to spare him between your own duties. My dear, you do not know Basil. When he gets you to himself, he will be too happy to be exacting ; he will be the first to remind you of your duty to others.'

'Oh, Aunt Catherine ! you always say such nice things. It is not only words ; but you do give one such real, solid comfort. You have taken away every little tiresome scruple, and I feel as light as air.'

'Then you must come and talk to Robert now ; he is with Virginia in the drawing-room. Oh ! there are Ladybird's hoofs galloping up the avenue. Basil is in a hurry to get back to his sweetheart ; let us go and meet him !'

Basil gave me a droll look as he sprang from his saddle.

'Are you not glad I interrupted Mab's music lesson ?' he asked as he joined me. 'Were you ever more surprised in your life, Olga ?'

'There is no one like her,' I returned, in a whisper ; 'and, oh, Basil, she has made me so happy about things !'

'Yes, I know,' with a glance of full understanding ; 'that is just what you wanted—a talk with Aunt Catherine ;' and then we could say no more, as Mr. Fleming was crossing the room to speak to us.

Aunt Catherine was right, and the way has opened. It is a year and nine months since she said those words to me, and for three of those months I have been Basil's wife. Everything has happened as she predicted. Miss Boyle is at Fircroft—a trusted, faithful friend of the whole family—and I am at the Hall, its happy, its most happy mistress ! My husband says he has now not a wish ungratified. I almost tremble when he tells me so ; but, indeed, I could say the same myself. There is no one in the world so blessed as I am. Sometimes when Reggie calls me mother, and Basil smiles as he hears it, the tears come into my eyes ; but they

are tears of joy. We talk often of those old days at St. Croix and of La Maissonnette, and again and again I bless the day when Aunt Catherine and I crossed the sea on that quest that seemed so hopeless then, and yet was so near fruition—the search for Basil Lyndhurst.

THE END

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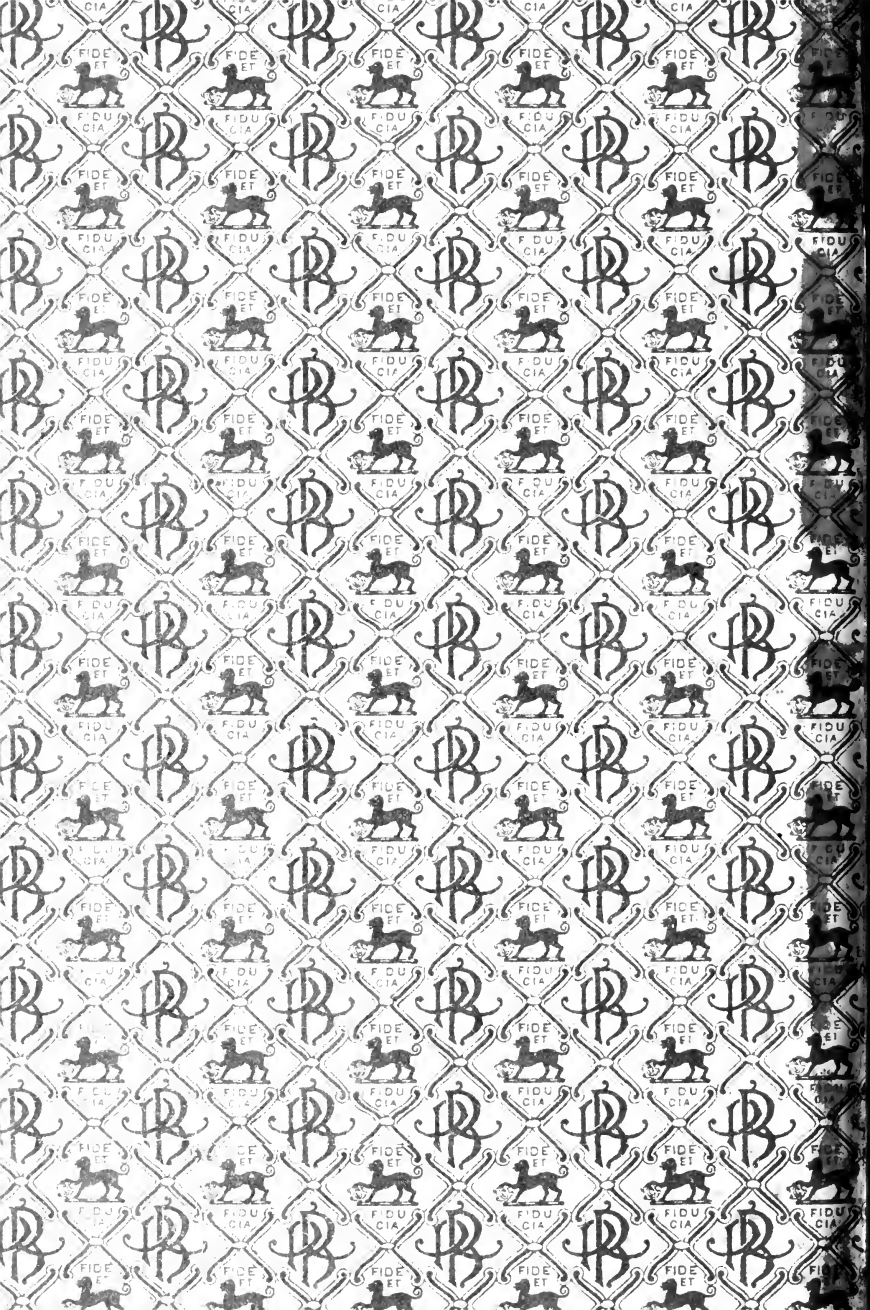
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